HELIOGABALUS

by H. L. MENCKEN *and*
GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

100.00

HELIOGABALUS

A BUFFOONERY IN THREE ACTS

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NEW YORK ALFRED · A · KNOPF *MCMXX*

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

VARIUS AVITUS BASSIANUS HELIOGABALUS:	*Emperor of Rome.*
PAULA:	*His senior wife.*
ANNIA FAUSTINA:	*Junior wives.*
CAELESTIS:	
AQUILIA SEVERA:	
ALINIA:	
DACIA:	
LUCIA THE GALATIAN:	*A Christian maiden.*
SIMON OF CAPPADOCIA:	*A Christian clergyman.*
CAIUS MACRINUS:	*Commander of the Western fleet.*
POLORUS:	*A physician.*
PISO:	*A physician.*
RUFINIUS:	*Major-domo to* HELIOGABALUS.
HECATUS:	*A Greek.*
CORNELIA METELLI:	*A public woman.*
LUCIUS MACEDONICUS:	*A pickpocket.*

Army Officers, Imperial Guards, Additional Wives of the Emperor, Dancing Girls, Slaves, etc.

ACT I: The atrium in the imperial palace. The night before New Year's Day, A.D. 221.

ACT II: The imperial bed-chamber. Toward the middle of the year 221.

ACT III: Antechamber and banquet hall in the palace. The evening of the following day.

ACT I

ACT I

The atrium in the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill. A splendid and even gorgeous apartment, perhaps fifty feet long and twenty broad. The spectator views it from one side, and one of the longitudinal walls thus constitutes the background. At the left of the spectator is the arched doorway that leads into the ostium, or entrance hallway. At the right are two doors giving into the peristyle, or garden. In the back are doors opening upon various apartments, among them, a small triclinium or banquet-room.

The atrium has walls of Cipilino marble, and there are ornate pillars supporting each door-frame. In the centre of the floor is a small pool, perhaps six by eight feet, and flush with the floor. Above it, in the ceiling, is a skylight with movable bronze sashes, and gaudy silk blinds beneath. Despite the architectural magnificence of the apartment, its furniture, to modern eyes, seems meagre. To the spectator's right, between the garden doors, there is a solium—a high, stiff, ungainly chair, very wide, and upholstered in imperial purple, i.e., a colour rather like the crimson of today. In front of the solium stands a very ornate mensa, or table, with a few backless stools. There is nothing more. Light is furnished by Roman lamps

on very tall candelabra. The moon filters through the skylight.

It is the night before New Year's Day of the year 221 A.D.

As the curtain rises, HELIOGABALUS' *atriensis, or major-domo,* RUFINIUS *by name, ushers in the two physicians,* PISO *and* POLORUS. RUFINIUS *is a stout Gaul with a full red beard. He wears, of course, no toga, but there are chevrons of imperial purple on the short left sleeve of his tunic.* PISO *and* POLORUS *wear the paenula—a long, plain cape, with a hood not unlike a monk's cowl.* PISO'S *paenula is black, but* POLORUS' *shows the florid colours of a modern bath-robe.* PISO *is an old man and wears a long white beard;* POLORUS *is younger and wears his clipped, almost in the Van Dyke manner.*

RUFINIUS, *as soon as the two doctors have come to anchor by the pool, offers them a salver on which stand two goblets of wine and a dish of peanuts.*

RUFINIUS

The Emperor will be out presently. The banquet is just ending.

[*From within comes the sound of half-hearted mirth.*]

PISO

[*Reaching for one of the goblets*] Very thought-

ful of you, Rufinius: I need it. I was up all night with a confinement case.

POLORUS

[*Somewhat sniffishly*] Yes, my dear Doctor Piso, they are very tiresome. I'm glad I've been able to give them up.

PISO

[*Waspishly*] Give them up? *I*, Doctor Polorus, I *never* give them up! I pull them through.

POLORUS

[*Rather floored; apologetically*] I don't mean patients; I mean cases.

PISO

[*Put into good humour by the success of his repartee*] But *I* mean neither patients nor cases; I mean husbands.

POLORUS

[*Amiably, trying to make peace*] I suppose he was drunk, as usual.

PISO

Drunk? His very tears smelt like toddy. You could scarcely call him a husband in alcohol. He was an alcoholic *extract* of husband.

POLORUS

It's astounding how much they get down when such things are going on in the house.

PISO

Yes, and the tighter they get, the more they want to kiss the baby. And if you let them do it, then you have two cases of delirium tremens on your hands—father and child. And the mother raising hell.

[*Sounds of feeble, somewhat laborious mirth come from the banquet-room*]

POLORUS

What do you think of—? [*Nodding toward the banquet-room*]

[PISO *takes a handful of peanuts and munches them during the following, now and then biting into a bad one and spitting it into the pool*]

PISO

What is *your* idea?

POLORUS

It looks simple. I say diabetes.

PISO

Why?

POLORUS

Well, for one thing, he's always so thirsty. Then, his legs are beginning to trouble him. Thirdly—

PISO

Nonsense! He was born with that thirst. As for his legs, they are simply overworked. The human leg was designed to carry a man, and nothing more. Add his clothes, his conscience, his artillery, and his jewelry, and then pile on a barrel of wine or so every day, and it begins to lose confidence in itself.

POLORUS

The Empress Paula tells me—

PISO

Yes, I know all about the patent medicines he's swallowed and the quacks he's had here. There was that Syrian, for instance. He prescribed water-drinking.

POLORUS

She says he couldn't keep it on his stomach.

PISO

No wonder! I daresay his stomach wondered what it was.

POLORUS

What do you think of proposing?

PISO

Nothing could be simpler. If this were an ordinary man, say you or that fat poinsettia over there, [*indicating* RUFINIUS] I'd simply put him to bed, give him a good big dose of castor oil, and then send in

my bill. Maybe I'd add a mustard plaster, and a gargle in the morning. The next day, repeat the dose. And so on.

PISO

[*Uneasily*] But surely you're not going to—?

POLORUS

[*Horrified*] What! Prescribe castor oil for an emperor? The gods forbid! Where are your professional ethics? Besides, I've been in jail, and don't like it. And when I think of lions in the arena gumming this old epidermis—!

[PAULA *enters from the peristyle, and the two physicians, catching sight of her at once, make low bows*]

PISO AND POLORUS

Majesty!

PAULA

[*To* PISO, *gushingly*] Oh, doctor, I am so glad to see you! I have been *so* worried!

PISO

[*In his best manner*] Be calm! This— [*indicating* POLORUS] is Dr. Polorus, my— [*maliciously*] assistant. Doctor, you are honoured by the notice of the Empress Paula.

PAULA

[*Buttonholing* PISO *tragically*] I surely hope you

gentlemen can do something for the poor Emperor. You can't imagine what I have gone through. I think he's getting worse all the time. And those awful quacks he has had!

PISO

Yes, I have heard. It's common gossip.

PAULA

One of them put him on water! Like a horse! [*It gradually becomes evident that* PAULA, *who is about* 37 *and rather chunky, is somewhat alcoholized and inclined to weep*] I thought he would die the first night. I was up the whole night. I wouldn't let any of the other ladies touch him. I suffered terribly.

[*Succumbing to the martyr complex, she sobs boozily on* PISO'S *shoulder*]

PISO

[*With professional tact*] And what seemed to be the symptoms?

PAULA

Just grief, I guess. The love of a pure woman. I still feel very faint.

POLORUS

Perhaps a goblet of wine—

PAULA

[*Promptly motioning to* RUFINIUS] And you, too.

Pardon me for forgetting. I am all worn out. You doctors have to be up all night, and—

PISO

[*Reaching for his goblet*] People simply *will* send for one. I seldom get out of my clothes.

[*The three drink*]

POLORUS

And you were saying that the Emperor—

PAULA

Doctor, you'd hardly believe it. He's so changed I hardly know him—always complaining about his stomach-aches, and taking pills and things. You know how lively he used to be—always up to some pleasantry. Why, even when we had a quiet dinner here at home—just him and me and the other girls—he'd have in one of those dancers from Mesopotamia, and make him dance on a red-hot stove. Always something jolly. And how he would laugh and cut up! But now look at him! Even this New Year's Eve banquet is like a funeral. Think of it! He wouldn't let me go to it—and I've been sitting beside him at banquets for—well, ever since I was almost a child. And all the other girls barred out, too—all except Dacia.

PISO

[*Professionally*] Too bad, too bad!

PAULA

I say nothing against Dacia—not a word. She is a very nice girl. I was glad to see him marry her—that is, if he had to marry anybody. I thought he had wives enough. You can imagine what trouble it makes for *me*. But you don't want to hear *my* afflictions.

POLORUS

Your Majesty was saying that the Emperor is depressed.

PAULA

Depressed? You'd think he had on damp underclothes! And he keeps on sending for those quacks —even those crazy dervishes and religious healers from Asia.

PISO

Religion? Aha! Mental symptoms!

PAULA

Why, yesterday I hear he actually had in one of those awful Jews—Christians, some of them now call themselves—the kind they burn at the circus.

PISO

Riff-raff! They actually say they can cure a sick man without medicine. [*To* POLORUS] Your pardon, Doctor.

POLORUS

No offence at all, I assure you. My family is from

Spain—Mendoza was the family name. I loathe these kikes as much as you do.

PAULA

[*Continuing*] So I sent for you doctors. I hear you do wonders. But you must be careful. No feeling of pulses or sticking out of tongues. Just say you have heard he is feeling poorly, and have dropped in as a matter of patriotism. Don't tell him I sent for you. He'll be here in a few moments, as soon as the *banquet* [*she sniffs sarcastically*] is over. You'll see how sick he is the moment he comes in.

POLORUS

And as for the symptoms, Majesty: you say he complains of—

[*His speech is cut short by the entrance of a guest who comes from the triclinium supported by two slaves. He is very drunk and they drop him beside the pool and proceed to bathe his face*]

PAULA

Oh, the poor man! Something has disagreed with him.

PISO

Who is the gentleman?

PAULA

I don't know him. I think he is one of the generals

from the colonies. [*To one of the slaves*] Who is he?

THE SLAVE

Caius Macrinus, Majesty. Commander of the Western Fleet.

PISO

Ah, a naval officer! [*To the slave*] Is he taken this way often?

THE SLAVE

[*Idiotically*] Only when he drinks.

POLORUS

I think it may be fits. Let's take a look at him.

PAULA

Shall I order some wine?

PISO

No. That is, not for the patient.

[*As* RUFINIUS *makes for the goblets,* PISO *and* POLORUS *approach* CAIUS *and shoulder the slaves away.* CAIUS *collapses at the edge of the pool, and before* PISO, *who is aged and stiff, can grab his end, slides into the water, and out of* POLORUS'S *hands. The slaves jump in after him and drag him ashore, and the two doctors proceed to revive him*]

POLORUS

Grab his arm and pump it up and down!

PISO

What do you take me for, a milk-maid? I am a physician!

POLORUS

I thought we'd try some artificial respiration.

PISO

Artificial respiration your grandmother! Slap him on the back: that'll fetch him.

POLORUS

Yes, and give him pneumonia.

PISO

Pneumonia, flapdoodle! A drunken man *never* gets pneumonia!

POLORUS

Since when?

PISO

Since the time of Romulus and Remus.

POLORUS

Well, *I* have seen it.

PISO

You *thought* you saw it. The patient probably had cholera. Or maybe a fractured skull.

POLORUS

[*Sarcastically*] Palm-reader!

PISO

[*With equal sarcasm*] Barber!

PAULA

[*Brightly*] Why not roll him on a barrel?

POLORUS

Too late! He's getting over it. Besides, [*indicating the banquet room*] what barrels there are, are in there.

[CAIUS *sits up and gazes about him weakly. Catching sight of* PAULA, *he waves his hand at her feebly. He has forgotten where he is, and doesn't know that she is the Empress*]

CAIUS

[*Thickly*] Ah there, fair one! How about a little drink!

PISO

[*Horrified*] Sacrilege!

PAULA

[*Flattered by his apparent admiration*] Oh, let the poor commander alone. He's feeling badly. [*She approaches him, with a goblet*] There, that will make you better.

CAIUS

I remember you, little peppermint, but I can't place you. Didn't we meet in—Alexandria?

PAULA

[*Sympathetically*] Oh, don't worry your poor head.

CAIUS

It doesn't worry me. I remember you now. What's become of that little dark girl?

PISO

[*In alarm*] The Commander seems to be flighty. He imagines he's in a—er, a private house.

RUFINIUS

[*Taking charge of the situation*] I'd better help him out.

[*He grabs* CAIUS, *and with the two slaves, begins leading him out*]

CAIUS

[*Drunkenly*] But I haven't paid for the drink! Let me pay for the drink! I insist upon paying for the drink! I—

[*Exeunt*]

POLORUS

Delirium!

PAULA

[*Virtuously*] I can't imagine what he was talking about.

PISO

Oh, I have seen thousands of such cases. Most doctors make the mistake of—

[*He is cut short by an uproar in the triclinium. Trumpets sound. Suddenly three slaves appear at the door, crying* "The Emperor!" PAULA *at once prepares to depart*]

PAULA

[*To the doctors*] Remember. Very careful! Don't ask him to stick out his tongue!

[*As* PAULA *slinks into the peristyle,* HELIOGABALUS *enters from the triclinium, with* DACIA *on his arm. He is tall, sallow and apparently somewhat liquored; his bad humour is obvious. He stalks across the stage to the solium without a word, hands up* DACIA, *and takes his seat beside her with a scowl. He wears a magnificent toga of imperial purple, with a wide band of cloth-of-gold at the bottom. He carries a small baton, with a gigantic ruby at one end. He is bareheaded*

[DACIA *is a very pretty blonde of, say, nineteen. It is plain that she admires* HELIOGABALUS *vastly, but there is a touch of awe in her admiration, and it gives her a bit of stage-fright to be with him as here. She is dressed in the white garment of a Roman matron*

[*Following the two come several slaves, and two or three army officers. The latter have been guests at the banquet and are more or less tight*

[HELIOGABALUS, *seated upon the solium, claps his hand to his tummy and turns to* DACIA]

HELIOGABALUS

There it is again—that grinding pain.

DACIA

I'm *so* sorry, dear. Shall I send for something?

HELIOGABALUS

The oyster-soup, I dessay. [DACIA *pats his arm*] Or the speeches.

[*He dismisses the subject and sweeps the atrium with his eye. It alights upon the two doctors, who immediately drop to their knees*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Irascibly*] So there you are! Get up! [*They arise*] Well, what are *you* doing in the Night Court?

PISO

May it please your Majesty, the thought occurred to us that it would be a favourable moment for—paying our respects.

HELIOGABALUS

Aha, the crows smell the carrion! So you heard that I was ill?

PISO

Not exactly ill, Majesty, but—well, one might say slightly indisposed.

HELIOGABALUS

Indisposed? A sweet word. Then a man who has had his head cut off is suffering from tonsilitis. [*Hy-*

pochondriacly] I tell you my stomach has all gone to pieces. I can hardly digest the blush on a peach.

PISO

Your Majesty describes the symptoms very trenchantly. Half the doctor's work is done for him.

HELIOGABALUS

I haven't mentioned a damned symptom, you scurvy old body-snatcher. If I began to tell you all my symptoms I'd talk your ear off.

POLORUS

Perhaps your Majesty will favour us with, say a specimen or two.

HELIOGABALUS

[*He hesitates, but finally thinks well of the suggestion*] Well, if you are interested . . . . For example, what would you say of a sort of peculiar buzzing sensation at the pit of the stomach, an hour after meals? [*He makes elaborate circular motions with his fist*] And then a sour head-ache, with peculiar flashes of light before the eyes? Sometimes white; sometimes red; sometimes a sort of greenish purple, or pinkish yellow, or bluish—

[*He halts lugubriously*]

POLORUS

[*Judicially and with a profound frown*] I should call it hyperacidity.

PISO

[*Derisively*] What! Hyperacidity? Then where is your heart-burn?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Interrupting*] Sir, I said *nothing* of any heart-burn.

PISO

Precisely. My learned friend here simply—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Petulantly*] See here, who's sick, you or I? I tell you about stomach-ache, and you begin talking of heart-burn.

POLORUS

[*Virtuously*] *I* didn't mention it, Majesty.

HELIOGABALUS

And it's lucky for you that you didn't mention it, Majesty! What is *your* guess?

POLORUS

I say hyperacidity.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, that was your first guess. Now what is your second?

POLORUS

Cholelithiasis.

HELIOGABALUS

And then? What is number three?

POLORUS

Nervous dyspepsia.

HELIOGABALUS

[*In a sepulchral voice, gradually working himself into a rage*] And which one do you favour for the death-certificate?

POLORUS

[*Horrified*] Surely Your Majesty is joking!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Now thoroughly enraged, he leaps down from the solium and proceeds toward* POLORUS *like a lion stalking a deer*] Joking? Is a coroner's inquest a joke? Is an autopsy a joke? [*He explodes with wrath and bawls for the guard*] Out with the jackass! Shove him into tier two and fatten him for the leopards! Out with him!

[POLORUS *is hustled out, loudly protesting.* PISO *attempts a discreet sneak, but* HELIOGABALUS *detects it*]

HELIOGABALUS

Grab the old one! Duck him in the pool!

[*The slaves grab poor* PISO *and throw him in. He comes up instantly and tries to scramble out*]

PISO

[*Sputtering*] Injustice! Injustice!

HELIOGABALUS

Again!

[*They duck him*]

PISO

[*Coming up again*] I confess! Let me out! I admit everything!

[*The slaves haul him out. He shakes himself like a wet dog*]

HELIOGABALUS

Now throw him out.

[*They proceed to do it*]

PISO

Where is my stethoscope? I lost my stethoscope! I want my stetho—

[*Exit*]

DACIA

[*Sweetly, as* HELIOGABALUS *returns to the solium and wearily reseats himself*] You excite yourself, dear. [*She caresses him as if he were a troubled child, but a bit timorously*] You should be calmer. That old quack isn't worth—

HELIOGABALUS

Calm? How can I be calm with that dog-fight going on in my tummy? My sweet birdie, you underestimate the effects of matter on mind. I ought to have kissed you an *hour* ago. It was my duty. Moreover, I inclined to it—the thought presented itself to me. But just then I was seized. I love you—but I am sick.

DACIA

[*Sentimentally*] If you love me, I am happy.

HELIOGABALUS

So am I—theoretically. But this—— [*He rubs his front sadly. Then he suddenly pulls himself together. To the assemblage*] Let us proceed to business. What is the first case?

[*A slave comes forward with a scroll and writing materials and takes his place at the ornate table. He is the Clerk of the Night Court. Two armed guards stand to either side of him. The following scene is played very quickly*]

THE CLERK

Hecatus; 27 years old; attempted burglary.

HELIOGABALUS

Hecatus? Is he a Greek?

THE CLERK

Yes, your Majesty.

HELIOGABALUS

Then don't bother to bring him in. Have him thrown into the Tiber at once. Next case.

THE CLERK

Cornelia Metelli; 20 years old; soliciting.

HELIOGABALUS

Bring her in.

[*The guard hauls in a bedraggled old wench, fully 45*]

CORNELIA

[*Beginning to protest from the moment she enters the door*] Your Majesty, I give you my word I never done anything whatsoever at all. I was just walking down the street, going to meet a friend, when that policeman come up and—

HELIOGABALUS

Stop lying, my dear. I remember you very well. The last time, you held up a drunken pall-bearer on his way home from a funeral.

CORNELIA

Your Majesty, you have got me mixed up with some other lady. I give you my word I never—

HELIOGABALUS

Silence! Now let's be friends. How is trade?

CORNELIA

Your Majesty, you do me wrong, I assure—

HELIOGABALUS

Well, now, are we going to be friends, or do you want me to send you up at once?

CORNELIA

Don't send me up again!

HELIOGABALUS

Then answer my polite question. I asked you "How is trade?" I take it that it's not as good as it used to be. [CORNELIA *begins to sniffle*] I suppose the night has to be very dark for you to be—insulted. Or the stranger very soused.

CORNELIA

A poor girl ain't got a chance, Majesty.

HELIOGABALUS

Not after forty-five. Or fifty. [*To the assemblage in general*] Consider, gentlemen, the sad fate of this poor working girl. Think of her days of hope, of happiness. Of success. Think of the men she has charmed! Think of the old, sad romance of her betrayal! I dare say it was some gladiator, or an actor. Ah, the misery of the years! And now contemplate her beauty in its decay: the night must be very dark, or the stranger very soused. Observe that sepulchral wreck of what once was a human face. [CORNELIA *sobs*] No, my baby, I shall not send you up. Instead I am going to *do* something for you. Day chases day: you need a comfortable home. I appoint you a Vestal Virgin.

CORNELIA

[*In horror*] Oh, my God! Oh, your Majesty!

HELIOGABALUS

Sheriff, do your duty! [*The guard drags her out, protesting raucously*] Next case!

THE CLERK

Lucius Macedonicus; aged 30; picking pockets.
[*The prisoner is brought in*]

HELIOGABALUS

Guilty or not guilty?

THE PRISONER

Not guilty.

HELIOGABALUS

That is to say, guilty.

THE PRISONER

Believe me, your Majesty, I wouldn't lie to—

HELIOGABALUS

[*To the clerk*] How many terms has he served?

THE CLERK

Twenty-seven, your Majesty.

HELIOGABALUS

I begin to doubt the efficacy of the modern jail system. Let me think. [*He meditates*] The sheriff is ordered to take the prisoner to the place of execution——[*The prisoner yells, but is silenced by the guard, and* HELIOGABALUS *goes on*]——and there chop off the index finger of his right hand—with one clean blow of a well-honed sword—no amateurish butchering.

THE CLERK

Any further command?

HELIOGABALUS

On his recovery, he is to be given a place on the police force.

THE CLERK

[*In surprise*] The police force?

HELIOGABALUS

I said the police force. A pickpocket with the index finger of his right hand gone is harmless. And so is a policeman. Call the next case.

[*The prisoner is hustled out*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Calling after*] Bring me the finger, Sheriff. I admire it. [*To the Clerk*] What is the next case?

THE CLERK

Lucia the Galatian, alias Lucia the Christian; aged 21; blasphemy and inciting to riot. One of the soap-box cases, your Majesty.

HELIOGABALUS

Bring her in.

[LUCIA *is brought in by the guard. She wears a simple white stola, the common dress of Roman women, with a cross embroidered in front. She is very pretty, and* HELIOGABALUS *shows immediate signs that he has duly observed the fact. He settles his toga, wets his finger, smoothes his eyebrows, and assumes a mixture of amiable*

smile and judicial frown. LUCIA *folds her arms and is silent*]

DACIA

[*To* HELIOGABALUS] She is *very* pretty.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Heavily*] Oh, yes—in a sense.

DACIA

It's a pity to see such a pretty girl in the hands of the police.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Grasping at the idea*] A pity? It's revolting! Darling, it shocks me to expose you to such a spectacle. I really can't permit it. My conscience would never let up on me.

DACIA

But—

HELIOGABALUS

Exactly. Wifely duty, and all that. I understand. You love me. But I can't permit it, really. Moreover, it is getting very late. You must have your rest. [*He rises*] My arm.

DACIA

I am not sleepy at all, dear.

HELIOGABALUS

See. It has begun already! Insomnia from late hours. That's the way *I* began. I promised your father to take care of you, to cherish you, to——

DACIA

But—

HELIOGABALUS

I positively refuse to let you sacrifice yourself. I hadn't noticed the time. Now, my dear. [*He offers his arm, and she dutifully takes it, though with obvious reluctance. They step down from the solium and proceed to the door of the peristyle. At the door*] You have been getting paler and paler for an hour. I noticed it but didn't say anything. Now right to bed, my little ginger snap. Don't forget that Heliogabalus loves you. [*He gives her a peck of a kiss*] I'll be with you anon.

[*She goes out without a word. Immediately the door closes behind her,* HELIOGABALUS *makes his way back to the solium with noticeable haste. First he takes a precautionary look over his shoulder at the door; then he devotes himself to a long gaze at* LUCIA]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Genially*] So this is Lucia!

LUCIA

[*Oratorically*] The peace of the Lord be with you, Cæsar! I am not afraid.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, surely not. I had no thought of harming you, my dear.

LUCIA

Ye who live by the sword shall perish by the sword. It is so written.

HELIOGABALUS

Perhaps you are right. But why did you kick up this disturbance on the street?

LUCIA

I made no disturbance, Cæsar. I obeyed the command. I preached the Son of God.

HELIOGABALUS

God? Which God?

LUCIA

The One God.

HELIOGABALUS

So there is only *one* now? I heard the rumour only last week. But why get excited about it? Why stir up those poor country yokels at the market, and give the policemen trouble?

LUCIA

I came to preach the Word. I came to bring peace. Aye, even peace to you, Cæsar;—with the sin and blood upon your hands.

HELIOGABALUS

[*To the clerk*] Mr. Clerk, the defendant is in the shadow. Can't we move the lamps a bit?

[*The clerk moves them experimentally*]

HELIOGABALUS

So; an inch or so to the left. That's better. [*To* LUCIA] And now, my dear, about this blood upon my hands. Surely you have confused me with some one else. I am never violent.

LUCIA

It was by your decree that they died—burned alive, torn to pieces by wild beasts, butchered by gladiators —five hundred souls.

HELIOGABALUS

Oh-h, you mean those—what do you call them?—Christians! Well, surely you are not complaining of that. All *that* is a mere matter of administrative routine. They practise magic; they claim to be able to heal the sick, even to raise the dead. The law is the law.

LUCIA

It is their faith that gives life; it is their faith that heals. And that faith [*touching her heart*] is here.

HELIOGABALUS

[*To the clerk*] I'll have to trouble you about the lights again. Bring that big lamp nearer to the prisoner. The rest of you stand back.

[*The clerk so places the light that* LUCIA'S *face is in the full glare of it.* HELIOGABALUS *views her with obvious and prolonged admiration*]

HELIOGABALUS

Thank you; now I can *hear* her better. [*To* LUCIA] And you were saying, my dear?

LUCIA

[*Striking her heart again*] My faith is here. The truth is here. The power of the spirit is here.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, so far, so good. But surely you don't claim to be a magician like those other Christians. A pretty girl like you!

LUCIA

There is no magic! There is only the spirit.

HELIOGABALUS

But, my dear! What has the spirit to do with the belly-ache? How can the spirit help a man when he is doubled up? What could it do for *me?*

LUCIA

Even you, Cæsar. Even *you* are not beyond the grace of the Lord.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Growing more interested*] Do you mean to say that I can be cured by this new magic, this so-called Christianity?

LUCIA

By Christianity, Cæsar, and by the spirit within. Even *you* may be healed.

HELIOGABALUS

Do you mean without swallowing any more pills?

LUCIA

I know nothing of pills. I know only the work of the Lord.

HELIOGABALUS

But what I am getting at is: what is the *machinery* of it? How do you set the Lord to *working?* Just how do you do it?

LUCIA

[*Simply*] We pray.

HELIOGABALUS

Is *that* all?

LUCIA

We lay on hands.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Vastly interested*] So! You lay on hands? And do you yourself—that is to say, are you yourself a practitioner of this—this—laying on of hands?

[*He leans over to glance cautiously at the door through which* DACIA *has gone*]

LUCIA

My prayers have been answered. I take no reward. I would ask the Lord's mercies even for you, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, all I have to say is that you are a very nice

girl. First you accuse me of murdering your friends, and now you say you are willing to pray for me,—and even to lay on hands.

LUCIA

It is the command: forgive those who have ill-used you.

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, I say: now you are going too far. Imagine *me* ill-using *you.* Sweet piece, you *wrong* me.

LUCIA

[*In surprise*] I am not to be burned?

HELIOGABALUS

The idea! Burn *you!* The very thought of it revolts me. You have been misinformed, my dear. I am a very humane man—even a polite man.

LUCIA

But—

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, I know what you are going to say. Now and then I am irritable—and maybe order a man or two, or a dozen or so, to the—that is, now and then, I let the law take its course. But when a man is in bad health—and always has the stomach-ache—he sometimes gets out of humour. Who wouldn't? You have no idea how much I have suffered, and what awful medicines I have taken. Not half an hour ago I had to have another of those quacks ducked in this very

room. Well, the Christians have this easy cure—this way of curing by laying on hands—and yet they let me suffer. Is it any wonder that I sometimes lose my temper? Now you say that *you* also know the trick, and I was wondering—

LUCIA

I shall pray for you, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, by all means. But this laying on of hands—I have a notion that it might, er—fit my particular case even better.

LUCIA

[*Diffidently*] We could try.

HELIOGABALUS

So we could. But not here. I have a feeling that a crowd might be—well, unsympathetic. [*To the clerk*] The court recesses, Mr. Clerk. Clear the room!

[*The guards proceed to drive every one out in headlong haste, leaving only* HELIOGALBUS, LUCIA *and* RUFINIUS]

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* RUFINIUS] I shall cross-examine the witness in chambers. [*To* LUCIA, *offering her his arm*] My dear.

[*As they go out,* HELIOGABALUS *takes another precautionary look at the peristyle. They go into*

one of the rooms at the rear. The door closes. RUFINIUS, *to whom the business is an old story, heaves a sigh, pours out two goblets of wine, and places them on the small table near the door. He then goes to the door of the ostium, and calls out to an unseen guard*]

RUFINIUS

[*In bored tones*] Better get the musicians ready, Sampinus. They'll probably be wanted presently. Are they all sober?

[*The guard makes no reply, but the clank of his sword is heard. As* RUFINIUS *turns back,* PAULA *enters from the peristyle. She is somewhat dishevelled*]

PAULA

The Emperor—where is the Emperor?

RUFINIUS

He has just stepped out, Majesty.

PAULA

Just stepped out? Where has he gone?

RUFINIUS

He hasn't gone anywhere, Majesty.

PAULA

Bosh. Either he is out or he is not out. Don't deceive me!

[RUFINIUS, *stumped, answers nothing, but his eyes wander to the door.* PAULA *quickly notices*]

PAULA

So he's in *there,* is he? And who is it *this* time?

RUFINIUS

A young woman, Majesty—a young Christian woman.

[*There is a loud knock on the inside of the door, and* RUFINIUS *steps to answer. He opens the door very slightly and pokes his head in*]

RUFINIUS

Majesty?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Within*] Music!

[RUFINIUS *claps his hands, and instantly two musicians come in from the ostium. One has a Greek pipe and the other a lyre. The piper blows a loud blast and breaks into lively music. Suddenly there are again loud knocks on the inside of the door, and* RUFINIUS *pokes in his head once more*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Within*] Not so damned loud! Something soft —and dreamy!

RUFINIUS

[*To the musicians*] Turn off the air in that pipe!

[HELIOGABALUS' *order appears ominous to both* RUFINIUS *and* PAULA, *and they look at each other*]

PAULA

This looks serious.

RUFINIUS

I fear so, Majesty.

PAULA

You say she is a Christian girl—one of those ex-Jewesses who bawl and beat tambourines on the streets? What does she look like?

RUFINIUS

I regret to report—

PAULA

Speak up! Is she good-looking?

RUFINIUS

[*Reluctantly*] In a sense, yes.

PAULA

That means she is very beautiful, doesn't it? Do I know any one she looks like?

RUFINIUS

[*With a heavy attempt at courtliness*] Your Majesty must consult your mirror.

PAULA

Enough of that blather! Do you think that I don't *know* I'm—nearly twenty-eight? [*With bitterness*] If I were still what I used to be, I'd be in that room myself.

[*Another knock on the inside of the door.* RUFINIUS *responds. Unintelligible words from within.* RUFINIUS *turns, empties the two goblets, takes an-*

other flask from the table, and refills them. The musicians keep droning softly]

PAULA

What is that stuff?

RUFINIUS

The wine from Britain, brought to the Emperor by Caius Macrinus.

PAULA

You mean that stuff that tastes like smoke? Wine your grandpa! So he's going to try *that* on that poor girl! The third degree!

[RUFINIUS *passes in the two goblets*]

RUFINIUS

It *is* somewhat heady.

PAULA

I should say it *is*. Why, the first time I tried it my head spun around like a ballet girl. Now tell me about this girl. Is it just a—you know—or is it—?

RUFINIUS

I'm afraid it is.

PAULA

Is what? [*Maudlinly*] Tell me, Rufinius! You wouldn't desert me! Tell me the truth!

RUFINIUS

I'm afraid it's serious.

PAULA

You mean—?

RUFINIUS

Well, he hasn't ordered any guard to take her away in the morning.

PAULA

[*Hysterically*] There! I knew it! He'll marry her, and then I'll have another on my hands. Eleven already—and now one more! I'll go crazy if he keeps this up.

RUFINIUS

[*Reassuringly*] Well, maybe I'm wrong, after all. Perhaps he's merely interested in her talk.

PAULA

[*Inconsolable*] Yes, that's the worst of it. If it was only her looks I wouldn't care. A man gets his fill of *looking* in no time. But when he begins to *listen* he's lost. [*Bursting into tears*] I think this is too much. I've tried to be a good chief wife to the Emperor. Have you ever heard me complain when he came home with a girl and—sent for the musicians? Never! But I'm getting tired of this *marrying*. When he marries another one *I* have her on my hands. Who has to keep order among them? Who protects them when he gets into a bad humour and begins to talk of throwing half a dozen of them to the crocodiles?

[*She blubbers*]

RUFINIUS

But maybe Your Majesty is too pessimistic. I have a feeling that—

[*A knock from within the door interrupts him. He goes to the door and the salver is handed out. On it are the two goblets. One is empty; the other is still full*]

PAULA

[*Rushing up, she immediately notes the full goblet*] Ha! One still full! [*Hysterically*] What did I tell you? This one is a wise one: she refuses to drink. Now he's done for!

RUFINIUS

[*Alarmed at last*] It looks pretty bad.

PAULA

Bad? I tell you it's all over! I got him that way myself—and so did most of the others. I know! [*Rising to martyrdom*] Oh, what have I done to deserve this! And a Christian, too—a common street woman, praying and bawling in the gutters! Imagine the palace with her around! Worse, imagine the Emperor! Here, give me the goblet. I feel faint!

[*She downs the goblet*]

[*A commotion inside. A hand on the knob of the door*]

RUFINIUS

[*In alarm*] Your Majesty had better—

PAULA

Yes, yes. [*Starting off*] Let me know what happens.

[*She sneaks out just as* HELIOGABALUS *enters with the girl on his arm*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* RUFINIUS] Kick these vermin out [*indicating the musicians*] They play bawdy music.

[RUFINIUS *kicks them out*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* LUCIA] And now, little dear, as I was saying—

[*His eye suddenly lights on the two goblets, and he notes that the second one has been emptied*]

HELIOGABALUS

Rufinius!

RUFINIUS

Majesty!

HELIOGABALUS

Who emptied this goblet?

RUFINIUS

[*In great confusion*] Your Majesty, I assure you—

HELIOGABALUS

Silence! I don't want to hear any lies from you. So you have taken to the jug again—after all your promises? While I am hard at work, engaged in the

administration of justice—labouring at affairs of state—you loll out here in the atrium in your cups!

RUFINIUS

[*At a loss*] Your Majesty, I—

HELIOGABALUS

I have ordered you not to lie! If you tell me that it evaporated—in four minutes—to the galleys! If you say you gave it to a blind beggar—to the boa constrictors! If you say thieves broke in and stole it—I'll burn you like a—like a Christian!

RUFINUS

[*Eager to shield the Empress, he takes the blame. He falls to his knees*] Majesty! I ask forgiveness!

HELIOGABALUS

Ha! You save your life! [*Irritably*] But this sort of thing has got to stop! I can't have drinking men about me. [*A pause while he meditates*] You must be punished. You must have your lesson. [*Another pause*] How would you like to lose those beautiful pink whiskers?

RUFINIUS

[*Horror-stricken, he falls flat on the floor*] Majesty!

HELIOGABALUS

That's it, exactly. Call in the guard and we'll chop

them off at once—and maybe a slice of ear with them.

LUCIA

[*Protesting*] I hope your Majesty—

[*She is cut off by the entrance of* PAULA, *who bounds in from the peristyle.* PAULA, *by now, is in the last stages of a crying drunk*]

PAULA

Stop!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Startled*] What?

PAULA

Rufinius is innocent!

HELIOGABALUS

Then it was—

PAULA

Yes, *I* drank it. I was feeling faint. I took it—medicinally.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, it seems to have medicated you, all right.

PAULA

I think I had *cause* to be ill.

HELIOGABALUS

What had you been eating?

PAULA

Yes, laugh while I suffer! You never think of me!

Here am I, so faint I can hardly walk—and you give banquets, and bring in women off the street, and turn the palace into a—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Sternly*] My dear, you talk pish. This lady is Lucia. Lucia, the Empress. Lucia was arrested—by a grievous error—and brought before me—and we have been discussing certain problems—chiefly sociological.

PAULA

Yes, I know what your problems are—whether to make love to her and fill her with nonsense, or just grab her.

HELIOGABALUS

My dear, I forbid you. Such talk is libellous, and grossly licentious. You will make me believe that the wine has—affected you.

PAULA

[*To* LUCIA] Don't you let him come over you with his soft-soap. That man could talk a woman into anything. Haven't I seen him do it, with one girl after another? He'll make you believe you are Venus and then, when you get to be as I am, he'll—

HELIOGABALUS

What foolishness, my dear! Imagine this beautiful, this innocent, girl ever getting like you are!

PAULA

Wasn't I beautiful and innocent once?

HELIOGABALUS

Well, maybe *once.*

PAULA

[*Maudlin*] And when I think of those other poor girls.

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* LUCIA] Unluckily, my sweet Venus, the Empress is not herself. I have noticed it for some time. About twenty years. [*To* PAULA] Wouldn't it be better, darling, if you went to bed? Perhaps a good night's rest would help you. Or shall I send for Piso?

PAULA

Piso? Never! That dirty old fraud—

HELIOGABALUS

And yet you sent for him to monkey with my stomach—my poor, sick stomach! Don't say you didn't. I know all about it. By this time, my dear, you should have more respect for my spy system.

PAULA

That's the way: You always put it on *me!* When *you* have done something, you accuse *me* of something. Oh, what—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Humouring her*] But why go into that? You are

—ill, and ought to be in bed. And besides, I have business. There is, for example, the matter of Rufinius' ear. It had better be attended to at once.

RUFINIUS

Oh, Majesty, Majesty!

PAULA

Rufinius is innocent. I drank the wine—all of it!

HELIOGABALUS

I believe you—but nevertheless, Rufinius *lied* to me. Can I afford to let it get about that it is safe to lie to the Emperor of Rome? Surely not. Now, go to bed and get a good night's rest and let me attend to Rufinius' ear. He is tired of waiting. The longer we put off the matter of his ear, the longer it will take to heal.

[*Taking her arm he pushes her out*]

PAULA

[*Going out blubbering*] What have I ever done to deserve such awful, such cruel, such—

[*She disappears*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* RUFINIUS] Now get the guard, and bring in the tools. It'll be all over in a few minutes.

RUFINIUS

[*Screeching*] Pardon, Majesty, pardon! I—

HELIOGABALUS

Silence! I have already pardoned you. This other business is a mere reminder, a souvenir. Go get the guard. I am busy.

[RUFINIUS *staggers to his feet, and starts slowly toward the ostium*]

LUCIA

But surely, your Majesty, you are not—

HELIOGABALUS

It won't take three minutes, I assure you. I'll do it myself—and I have a steady hand. Then we can resume our—studies—

LUCIA

[*Clutching his arm*] But surely this is not necessary. "Vengeance is Mine, saith the Lord." I beg of you, Cæsar—

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, I forgot. Your religion. Your Christianity.

LUCIA

We are forbidden to shed blood, even an enemy's.

HELIOGABALUS

But no one is asking *you* to shed any blood, little pigeon. I'll do it myself. Besides, there won't be much.

LUCIA

Or to *see* it shed.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, now, isn't that going rather far? Wouldn't it be fair to call that a rather *extreme* view?

LUCIA

[*Her hands on him*] Cæsar, I beg of you, I implore you—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Melting, he slips his arm around her*] Oh, if you put it on those grounds, why, of course—[*He strokes her hair*] Do you like me, Lucia, just a little bit?

LUCIA

I'd like you more, Cæsar, if—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Sentimentally*] How much more?

LUCIA

[*Her eyes downcast*] Maybe a great deal more, if—

HELIOGABALUS

Honest? You swear it?

LUCIA

We are forbidden to swear. "Let your Aye be Aye, and your Nay—"

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, but you *would*, wouldn't you?

LUCIA

I think I would, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Calling to* RUFINIUS] Rufinius, you may keep your ear. And your beautiful pink whiskers, too.

RUFINIUS

[*Turning at the ostium*] Your Majesty is good!

HELIOGABALUS

Moreover, you look tired! You have long hours. Suppose you take a little nap out in the ostium. I'll call you if I want you. I have a bit more—business —with this young lady.

RUFINIUS

At your Majesty's command.

HELIOGABALUS

And before you go out, you might as well dim some of these lights. They seem to me to be a bit glary, so to speak. How about putting out that big one over there? [RUFINIUS *extinguishes it*] So, that's better. Now run along. If I want you I'll call. But don't sit up for me.

[*Exit* RUFINIUS]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Approaching* LUCIA *and eyeing her admiringly*] And now, my dear and very delightful Christian maiden, now that we are alone, let us sit down and have a cosy little chat. Oh, not on that stool; it will tire your back. Why not here? [*He mounts the*

solium] See, I'll sit here in my regular place, and you—well, you sit so. [*He draws her to his knee*] How's that? Comfortable?

LUCIA

I am afraid, Cæsar. My people will be wondering where I am.

HELIOGABALUS

And a good joke on them, too. [*He laughs elaborately*] They'll think you are on your way to the lions—and here you are as safe as a bug in a rug—and converting the Emperor to this Christianity, as you call it. Now, about that Christian kiss you showed me—just how is it done?

LUCIA

[*Pecking at him modestly and very gingerly*] Like this.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Disappointed, shaking his head*] Um, kind o' short. Not like—but maybe—after a while, after a little while . . .

LUCIA

[*Bashfully, but with art*] I'm afraid you won't respect me.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Looks at her sharply*] What's that?

LUCIA

I said I thought you would think I was—

HELIOGABALUS

Pish-posh, little goose-liver. I never think such things. Don't mention them.

LUCIA

But you have a wife already.

HELIOGABALUS

A wife? I have eleven.

LUCIA

[*Horrified*] What! Eleven!

HELIOGABALUS

Eleven living. My poor, dear Marcia is dead—among others. Paula succeeded her. Dynastic reasons, my juicy plum: the merit system was unheard of in those days. Then there is Annia Faustina, with the red hair. And Cælestis. I married her in Gaul: I was very lonely. And then there is Aquilia Severa. And Falia. And dear little Dacia. That was Dacia who was with me when those scoundrels brought you in. You will like Dacia—that is, you *would* like her if you knew her. And then there is Gestina. And—

[*He hesitates*]

LUCIA

That makes seven.

HELIOGABALUS

And Blenina, the blonde. And Alinia. And—

LUCIA

That makes nine.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, let so much be considered the reading of the minutes. It would only bore you to go on. Besides, why do it? Put them beside *you*, my new baby—oh, my! You saw one of them—Paula. Imagine a cultivated man, a man of artistic tastes, swapping a real kiss with—

LUCIA

But the Lord forbids. A man must cleave to one wife.

HELIOGABALUS

A sensible idea. In fact, a capital idea. If the rest of Christianity is like that, put down my name at once. But it's too late.

LUCIA

You have married all these women?

HELIOGABALUS

Every one of them, so far as I can make out. Including Paula.

LUCIA

Then you have broken the law of the Lord. Then you have sinned.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Snuggling close*] Oh, come now. Surely it is no sin to marry. I always thought that—

LUCIA

Marriage is of the Lord.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, then, how do you make it out that I have sinned? If it's all right to marry one wife, why should it be a sin to marry another wife?

LUCIA

You are mocking me, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

Not at all, I assure you. I am quite serious. Just *why* should it be a sin, as you call it, to marry more than one?

LUCIA

There are many reasons, Cæsar. The Lord has spoken. A man, in His eyes, can truly love but one woman.

HELIOGABALUS

Fiddlesticks, little prune cake. I have eleven wives, and I love no less than *four* of them.

LUCIA

Love them?

HELIOGABALUS

Well, more or less. At all events, I *did* love them. Now—

LUCIA

You loved them *truly?*

HELIOGABALUS

One of them for *two* long years!

LUCIA

But marriage must endure unto death.

HELIOGABALUS

It did. It wasn't *my* fault. But figure it for yourself: When I caught her with that gladiator, what could I do? It was a great shock to me.

LUCIA

You—?

HELIOGABALUS

It cut me to the heart. I almost felt like taking some of the poison myself.

LUCIA

[*Horrified*] You had her poisoned?

HELIOGABALUS

What was I to do? I went as far as I decently could. I invited the gladiator to dinner. They died in each other's arms. I even buried him at my own expense.

LUCIA

You are horrible.

HELIOGABALUS

I am a husband.

LUCIA

You are a pagan—an infidel!

HELIOGABALUS

And you? Isn't a Christian an infidel? You, too, are an infidel—but [*sentimentally*]—a very dear, sweet little infidel. Now, how about another of those Christian kisses—but this time a man's size one?

LUCIA

[*Not heeding him*] Could you share your love—or what you call your love—for me with any other woman?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Under the spell of her beauty*] You try my philosophy sorely.

LUCIA

[*Insistent*] Could you?

HELIOGABALUS

Well, I'm no longer as young as I used to be.

LUCIA

Could you?

HELIOGABALUS

Turn your head a bit, so that the light falls on your hair. Ah, the moon! There, that's better. Now, what was it you said?

LUCIA

Could you share your love for me with another woman?

HELIOGABALUS

[*A pause, during which he admires the picture. Emphatically*] No!

LUCIA

[*Radiant*] Ah, Cæsar, you see! Or you *begin* to see. The star of Bethlehem has begun to shine in Rome!

HELIOGABALUS

[*His arm about her*] I don't see any star, my dear, but the stars that shine in your amethyst eyes. Now, please—[*A kiss*] And now another.

LUCIA

What! Right away!

HELIOGABALUS

Don't be afraid of crowding them. I could stand millions of those stingy Christian kisses. A thousand of them would only make one real, honest Roman kiss.

LUCIA

No.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes.

LUCIA

No, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

I order you.

LUCIA

[*At once archly and coolly*] In whose name, Cæsar?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Desperately in her thrall*] In the name of your God, whose light I am beginning to see.

LUCIA

[*Now more persuaded*] Well, just a little one.

[HELIOGABALUS *negotiates a long, strangling, gurgling buss*]

LUCIA

Oh, my!

HELIOGABALUS

Was it nice?

LUCIA

[*Coquettishly*] No. You are bad, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

What! Bad!

LUCIA

Bad, bad, Cæsar.

[*A great crash in the ostium, with yells.* HELIOGABALUS *jumps to his feet and reaches for his sword, almost dropping* LUCIA. *Presently a Christian comes bounding in, with* RUFINIUS *and two guards hanging to him.* RUFINIUS *is in his undershirt and barefooted. The Christian is a man of gigantic stature, and the three have diffi-*

culty in holding him. But finally they pin his arms behind him]

THE CHRISTIAN

I want to see Cæsar! I must face Cæsar!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Observing that the three have at last made him fast. Folding his arms*] Let him speak.

THE CHRISTIAN

I accuse you, Cæsar, of debauchery.

HELIOGABALUS

What! You come here in the middle of the night to—

THE CHRISTIAN

I call on you in the name of the Lord—

HELIOGABALUS

[*To Lucia*] Do you know this gentleman? Who is he, and what does he want?

THE CHRISTIAN

I want you to liberate that poor, innocent girl—that lamb of the Lord.

LUCIA

He is Simon of Cappadocia.

SIMON

[*Still roaring*] Let her go! Release her from your loathsome embraces!

HELIOGABALUS

Listen to that! [*To Lucia*] Think of that, my dear!

LUCIA

[*Quietly*] You are wrong, Simon. The great Cæsar has done me no harm.

HELIOGABALUS

There, you see!

SIMON

He has not laid his hands on you?

LUCIA

No. That is—

SIMON

[*Refusing to believe it*] You fear him. You are afraid to speak! [*To* HELIOGABALUS] Cæsar, what are you doing to this maiden?

HELIOGABALUS

Doing to her? I am *admiring* her.

SIMON

What are you *going* to do to her?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Embarrassed*] Now, really— [*To* LUCIA] Who did you say he is?

LUCIA

One of our pastors—Simon. [*Apologetically*] He is very—

HELIOGABALUS

A pastor? That is, a clergyman? [*To* SIMON] Are you in holy orders?

SIMON

I am a poor shepherd. I seek this strayed lamb. The wolves—

HELIOGABALUS

Good enough. I respect you for it. So you are a clergyman? Well, that simplifies matters enormously. Get out your tools. [*Bells begin to ring out*] The New Year!

SIMON

[*In alarm*] Tools?

HELIOGABALUS

The things necessary for your ceremony of holy marriage. I assume that you carry them with you. [*The din increases*] It's the New Year—and I turn over a new leaf!

LUCIA

[*In astonishment; protesting*] But, Cæsar—

HELIOGABALUS

Nonsense, my dear. Tomorrow it may be raining, or there may be a parade— [*To* SIMON] And now, Doctor, you may begin. Do I stand here?

[*The din still increases*]

LUCIA

[*Swept off her feet*] But, Cæsar, your other wives!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Himself completely gone*] I am *done* with my other wives!

LUCIA

Done with them?

HELIOGABALUS

Henceforth and for ever! You shall be my *one* wife! And your faith my faith!

LUCIA

[*Wide-eyed*] You mean—you mean, Cæsar, that through me, through love for me, you have come to see the light?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Swung along by the situation*] I mean, my fair maiden, that I have seen some kind of light in your beautiful eyes. I don't know just what it is, or exactly what it stands for, but I love you, adore you, want you—and am willing to follow it—blindly.

SIMON

[*To* LUCIA, *in amazement*] Can you—do you—believe?

LUCIA

[*Taking the Emperor's hand, as the chimes swell to a great clamour*] The great Cæsar sees at last!

HELIOGABALUS

[*His eyes feasting upon her*] What wonderful hair!

CURTAIN

ACT II

ACT II

Sometime in the middle of the year 221 A.D.
The scene is the cubicula nocturna, or bedroom, of the Emperor in the Palace. Time: 10 P.M.
A rather shallow and crowded apartment, with doors at the left and upper right, and a single window at the right. The Romans, of course, did not have beds of the sort we sleep in today. The thing they used was a sort of chaise-longue—that is, it had no foot-board. HELIOGABALUS' *bed is to the left of the spectator, with its back against the back wall and its foot facing the footlights. Beside it, separated by a space of no more than two feet, is the huge bed of his wives. It is, in design, exactly like his own, but it is at least 20 feet wide. The bed-clothing stretches unbrokenly from side to side of it, but there are separate pillows—twelve of them, each embroidered with a large monogram in purple. The pillow with the "L" [for* LUCIA] *is nearest* HELIOGABALUS' *bed. In the narrow space between this huge bed and* HELIOGABALUS' *there is a small night table, and on it are a lamp and a bottle of water and goblet. This lamp furnishes the only light in*

the room. Twelve clothes-racks, piled with finery, are at the extreme right.

As the curtain rises, HELIOGABALUS *is propped up in bed, reading a scroll by the light of the lamp.* LUCIA *is the only occupant of the other bed. She is lying near the middle of it, and is thus about 10 feet from* HELIOGABALUS.

HELIOGABALUS, *still holding the scroll in one hand, reaches over, pours out a goblet of water, looks at it sourly, makes a face, heaves a sigh, and drinks it.*

HELIOGABALUS

What stuff! No wonder I've still got the stomach-ache. [*Slowly rolling up the scroll as he gives it a final scrutiny*] Hm—hm—hm— . . .

LUCIA

[*After a pause, sleepily*] What have you been doing, Cæsar?

HELIOGABALUS

Drinking that washing-water you make me drink, and reading.

LUCIA

Reading what?

HELIOGABALUS

Poetry.

LUCIA

[*Piously*] Poetry is corrupting.

HELIOGABALUS

I agree with you. Listen to this: [*Reading*]

We shall meet beyond the Jordan
In the heavenly fields so fair;
We shall meet our loved and lost ones—
There will be no parting there.

LUCIA

[*Somewhat uncertainly*] Who wrote it?

HELIOGABALUS

One of your Christian poets—Commodianus. What you call a hymn writer. It sickens me.

LUCIA

[*Challengingly*] I like it.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, and you also like the Song of Solomon. I blush for you, little sweetbread. The Song of Solomon is pretty raw stuff. It is astonishing what a few months of marriage will do to an otherwise modest girl.

LUCIA

[*Primly*] Solomon sang of Paradise.

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, did he? But he took good care to fill Paradise with cuties. He had the imagination of a sailor. If Paradise is actually full of that sort of thing—if such didoes go on there—then all I can say is that—

LUCIA

Now don't start moralizing, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

Why not? I am moral: why shouldn't I moralize? Is it a crime for a cow to give milk?

LUCIA

[*An exclamation of disgust*] Oh, you always—

HELIOGABALUS

I have been faithful to you, little pullet, for 180 days and, what's more, 180 *nights*. How's that for morals? I defy you to find me a Christian to match it, at any weight. Think of it! Here am I, still in the prime of life, Emperor of Rome, Pontifex Maximus and all the rest of it, and yet I am as virtuous as a convict in the death-house. Here am I without a glass of schnapps for six months. Here am I with twelve wives, at least five of them charming, and I lock eleven of them out, and—

LUCIA

You must obey the Word.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, I have obeyed it. And what do I get for it? I still have my stomach-ache. And the one wife I have left rolls over about half a mile, and leaves me to shiver over bad poetry. [*He throws the scroll on the floor*] My dear, you must allow something to my training. I am used to society at night. Loneli-

ness always starts up my dyspepsia. How many times have I suddenly wakened and cast my eye over that bed and watched the sweet girls as they slumbered, or whispered to one another, or nudged one another, or giggled in their more or less perfect innocence. There was always at least *one* awake. And when she saw me sitting up wearily, tortured by some business of state, she would crawl over and pour me out a drink of the real stuff, and then snuggle into bed with me, and stroke my hair, and—

LUCIA

There was always an Eye upon you. There was One who saw.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, if there was, then I call it damned bad form. Even the gods should have *some* decency.

LUCIA

[*Horrified*] Decency?

HELIOGABALUS

Well, then, say good manners.

LUCIA

Now you blaspheme, Cæsar. You should pray.

HELIOGABALUS

I am willing. I have no objection to prayer—in its proper place. As you may recall, I was originally designed for the church: it was only accident that threw me into politics. But your proposal, now—

your scheme of praying *here* every evening—isn't it a bit vulgar?

LUCIA

What an idea!

HELIOGABALUS

Still, I can't rid myself of it. It haunts my conscience, so to speak. Just think of it a moment. Imagine praying in a—*bed*room! Don't you get a vague flavour of, say, impropriety? Isn't it a trifle—indelicate?

LUCIA

I think you are talking nonsense.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Reaching for the water-jug and pouring out another goblet*] Maybe I am. [*He takes a swallow, chokes and spits it out*] But isn't that precisely what a man seeks in marriage—a sort of virtuous nonsense? You forget the way I make a living, my cold little rabbit. My days are filled with gloomy duties. If I didn't look solemn as an owl the people would lose confidence in me. Say I go to the circus. There are twenty Jews in the arena, and the guards let out the lions. One Jew tries to climb up another Jew. Imagine the fun!

LUCIA

How you talk!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Rubbing his stomach, as if feeling a pain*] Nev-

ertheless, it is actual fun, genuine humour—and I naturally want to squat on my little rearo, throw back my ears and yell. But I am the Emperor, and so I must keep my dignity. Every one else whoops and bawls, but if I go further than a snicker then it begins to be talked of in the barber-shops, and people say that I am drinking too much. [*He casts a self-pitying glance at the water-bottle*] Even as it is, a good many of them think that I am somewhat—flightier—than I ought to be. For example, consider my interest in you—especially my interest in your faith—this so-called Christianity of yours. Well, to *you* it may be serious enough, but think how it must appear to the average respectable Roman. *He* regards it as simply pishposh—and he thinks of *me* much as he would think of me if he heard that I was interested in some sort of idiotic Egyptian sorcery.

LUCIA

[*Primly*] I see no possible connection.

HELIOGABALUS

Naturally not, little canary. You are not a Roman. Well, neither am I. I was born in Syria. I am hyphenated. But now to get to my point. First, my business all day is solemn; secondly, these little theological debates of ours in the evening are solemn. So you see what is the matter. I lack recreation. I lack—well, there is nothing to distract and mellow my mind.

LUCIA

[*With a touch of sarcasm*] Well, what do you suggest?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Brightening*] I suggest, first of all, little squash-pie, that you come over here and give your little papa a great big kiss.

LUCIA

[*Still primly*] You had better go to sleep.

HELIOGABALUS

What! At ten o'clock! That's another thing: this ten o'clock business. Really I—

LUCIA

It is time.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, it is time for a kiss. Plenty of time—time for a good, long, damp, sticky one. [*Wheedling, half rising*] Now, come on, Lucia! Be nice!

[*She rolls one eye at him, but doesn't answer. He projects one leg out of bed*]

HELIOGABALUS

Shall I? [*She rolls the other eye indifferently*] Do you dare me? I double-dare you to dare me!

[*She remains silent*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Now completely out of bed, and standing in the narrow space between the beds*] Well, here goes eti-

quette! Strictly speaking, my gumdrop, you should come to *me*. Remember, I am Emperor, not to say Pontifex Maximus. But let it go. Do I get the kiss?

LUCIA

[*With a stiff coquetry*] *A* kiss—perhaps.

HELIOGABALUS

Only perhaps. And only *a* kiss?

LUCIA

[*Slightly unbending*] Well, then, maybe—

HELIOGABALUS

Well, then maybe *what?*

LUCIA

Maybe *a* kiss.

HELIOGABALUS

Hear, hear! Maybe *a* kiss! And here I am Emperor, not to say Pontifex Maximus, not to say a husband! [*He climbs into the big bed and starts across toward* LUCIA *on hands and knees. She begins to roll away from him*] Hey, there, little cocoanut, where are you going? [*He falls flat*] Halt! [*He gets in motion again*] Remember, sweet oyster: love, honour *and* obey!

[LUCIA *eludes him, and he descends to various monkey-shines by way of wheedling her. He grabs a pillow and hurls it at her and she flings it back at him. Finally, to the tune of her screeches, he reaches her. He grabs her arm.*

[*At this instant there is a heavy knocking at the door.* HELIOGABALUS *leaps back, and listens on hands and knees, ears up, in the attitude of a cocker-spaniel*]

HELIOGABALUS

Thirty thousand oh-hells!

LUCIA

[*Covering her ears with pillows*] Cæsar!

HELIOGABALUS

[*He crawls out of the big bed very clumsily, and into his own bed again*] Who is it? [*An unintelligible voice is heard outside*] Who? [*Another blubber*] What? [*Another*] Who? [*Another*]

LUCIA

It must be Rufinius.

HELIOGABALUS

Ah, Rufinius! So it's Rufinius? And I told him I was—reading. [*He slides out of bed into the space between the two beds and grasps the heavy water-bottle by the neck*]

LUCIA

[*In alarm*] Don't hurt him!

HELIOGABALUS

Sh-h-h-h! [*The knock is repeated*] Sh-h-h-h! [*He takes a firm grip on the bottle*] Come in!

[*As the door opens and* RUFINIUS' *head appears,*

HELIOGABALUS *lets fly with the bottle. It misses* RUFINIUS *by a foot, but he ducks back and slams the door. A moment's silence*]

HELIOGABALUS

I bet it singed him, anyway.
[*He climbs back into bed*]

LUCIA

You might have killed him.

HELIOGABALUS

Might have killed him. I *ought* to have killed him. I'll attend to it in the morning.

LUCIA

He thinks I made you throw that bottle at him. [*Pause*] He doesn't like me.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Wearily*] Nonsense. What makes you think so?

LUCIA

I just simply *know* it.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Testily*] Hang this intuition! *How* do you know it? What's the evidence?

LUCIA

[*Somewhat reluctantly*] Well, when I gave him a tract one day last week he wouldn't take it.

HELIOGABALUS

Why not?

LUCIA

He said he was a heathen, and proud of it. He said his father was a Gaulish prince and worshipped idols. I warned him of—hell-fire.

HELIOGABALUS

And what did he say to that?

LUCIA

He said—well, he said he had made up his mind to *go* to hell.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Chuckling*] Good for old Rufinius! For that I'll have to let him off. Remind me *not* to have him killed in the morning.

LUCIA

[*Querulously*] You seem to sympathize with him.

HELIOGABALUS

In a sense, yes. Things are not as they used to be —not as he likes them. Rufinius, you see, is getting old, and old fellows dislike changes.

LUCIA

Have I changed anything?

HELIOGABALUS

You surely have. The palace is not quite the—well, not quite what it used to be.

LUCIA

[*Defiantly*] The change is for the better, Cæsar!

HELIOGABALUS

Morally, yes. *Spiritually*, yes. But—er, *socially*, so to speak,—[*a pause*]—hardly. [He *climbs wearily into bed*] Almost I am persuaded—

LUCIA

[*Sniffling*] You are longing for those awful women. You want them back.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Trying to convince himself of his own earnestness*] No, no. Really not, I assure you. I feel like—like a man who has come out of a lion's cage into a—

LUCIA

Into a what?

HELIOGABALUS

[*At a loss*] Into a—er—into—

LUCIA

[*Banally*] Into Paradise?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Quickly*] Well, surely not into Solomon's Paradise! [*Bitterly*] Har, har!

LUCIA

Still, you miss them.

HELIOGABALUS

Of course I do. Wouldn't a man miss—well, whatever he has become accustomed to? Wouldn't he miss his underdrawers?

LUCIA

There you go again!

HELIOGABALUS

What have I done *now?* Mentioned underdrawers! Well, if a man isn't to mention his underdrawers to his wife, who *is* he to talk about them to? And if he doesn't talk about them in a bedroom, *where* is he to talk about them?

LUCIA

[*Primly*] Why talk about them at all?

HELIOGABALUS

Why? Simply because they *have* to be talked about. [*With growing irascibility*] Don't their buttons come off? Don't they get lost in the wash? Don't they shrink? Don't they split up the back? Don't they tickle?

LUCIA

Well, why didn't you let me know it?

HELIOGABALUS

Know what?

LUCIA

That their buttons were off, and—

HELIOGABALUS

But they are *not* off. I was merely arguing. I used an illustration. As we Christians say, I spoke in a parable.

LUCIA

I think you are exciting yourself for nothing. You are tired out. Why don't you go to sleep?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Wearily*] Yes, there seems to be nothing else to do. My trouble *used* to be that I didn't get sleep *enough.* But now—! [*He composes himself heavily, and for a moment there is silence. He then tosses in bed and fusses with the bed-clothes, muttering under his breath and whining*] I've got a stomach-ache.

LUCIA

[*Raising herself and gazing at him*] Are you cold, Cæsar?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Bitterly*] Who'd care if I froze to death? . . . And why do you persist in always calling me *Cæsar?* It's so darned stiff and unbedroomy. My old wives used to call me pet names—like Helio and Gabby.

LUCIA

[*After a pause, archly*] Would you really like me to kiss you?

HELIOGABALUS

[*He sits up quickly, and stares at her*] Say that again. Louder.

LUCIA

Would you really like me to kiss you?

HELIOGABALUS

[*With a sigh*] You say it just as you might say, "Will you have another plate of fish-soup?"

LUCIA

But *would* you?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Meditatively*] Well, I dare say it might make me forget my stomach-ache—if it was a real kiss. [*With elaborate manner*] Am I to understand that you have an itch in that direction?

LUCIA

[*Taken aback*] Itch?

HELIOGABALUS

Pardon an old soldier, little moonstone. I should say an inclination, an impulse—a prompting.

LUCIA

[*Getting out of bed*] Now I'll show you, Cæsar, that I *do* love you, with a Christian love.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Somewhat at a loss*] Positively, darling, you alarm me.

[*She has got to* HELIOGABALUS' *bed by now. She enters the space between the two beds, and he sits up and takes her by the waist*]

LUCIA

There!

[*She kisses him—but very formally and briefly*]

HELIOGABALUS

Ah!

LUCIA

Now, Cæsar, you *know* I love you.

HELIOGABALUS

No; so far I merely suspect it. What is needed is corroboration. Now for another, sweet icebox—and let it be a bit more easy and dreamy. Let yourself go a bit. Don't hold your breath. Don't—forgive me, little one—be so gol-darned Christian.

[*A long one, during which, his arms about her,* LUCIA *tries to fight away from him. As they fall apart* LUCIA *grasps the bed for support*]

LUCIA

[*Her hands to her face*] Oh!

HELIOGABALUS

You may well say "Oh!" Many a woman lives and *dies* without ever getting *such* a kiss.

LUCIA

[*Startled*] It took my breath.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Not without pride*] I dare say. [*Hospitably*] But aren't you chilly out there? Why not come in?

LUCIA

[*Suddenly covering her face with her hands*] Oh, those other women! Those awful women!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Patting her shoulder*] Forget them! I expunge them from the minutes! I'll get rid of them—all of them!

[*At this,* PAULA, *who has been concealed under* HELIOGABALUS' *bed, suddenly pops out her head.* HELIOGABALUS *and* LUCIA, *of course, cannot see her. Her face mirrors the utmost indignation and she strains her head to hear better*]

LUCIA

All of them? Even that fat old Paula?

HELIOGABALUS

Purge your mind of all concern, darling. I'll have Paula poisoned in the morning. She has lived too long.

LUCIA

[*Horrified*] Oh, never! I won't have her poisoned.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, then, I'll marry her off to old Caius Macrinus—and ship them both to Persia.

LUCIA

But the others?

HELIOGABALUS

I'll marry off the whole crowd to Caius. The old souse deserves it.

LUCIA

[*Insinuatingly*] Even that pretty one—that Dacia?

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, either marry her off [*weakening*] or send her home to her mama. But enough of this. You'll catch your death of cold.

LUCIA

[*Without warmth, as if speaking to her father*] Is there room?

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, surely. [*He moves over and she climbs in*] Let me help you. [*He gives her a hand and she crawls under the covers. He then puts his arm around her, and they sit up together*] After all, confess that this *is* better than the farm over there. Now isn't it? When I crawl in there I feel like a lost orphan. Do you remember how I mislaid you the other night? I thought you had fallen out of bed, but there you were all the while, eighteen feet away. And now—

[*Another kiss*]

LUCIA

Cæsar, you are so—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Puffing out his chest*] I thought you'd like it. But it really takes me some time to get into form. Now tell me the truth: this is really nicer than praying, isn't it?

LUCIA

[*Tremulously*] I'm afraid it is—sometimes.

HELIOGABALUS

Afraid it is? What are you afraid of?

LUCIA

[*Relapsing into the Christian*] We are taught that—

HELIOGABALUS

Now there you go with that Christianity again! You are taught, are you? Well, I'll teach you something easier to learn. I am the old professor! Now to proceed with the lesson—

[*Another kiss. Toward its end there is a knock at the door.* HELIOGABALUS *draws back and glances over his shoulder, but quickly resumes the buss. Another knock*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*In a sudden rage*] Say, what do they think this is? A farce? If it's that old interrupting wheeze Rufinius again, off go both his legs! And both ears! And maybe a bud or two of nose!

[LUCIA *in terror leaps from the bed and into her own bed. Another knock at the door*]

LUCIA

You had better let him in. If it wasn't important, he surely wouldn't risk his life.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Obviously impressed by the notion*] Maybe you are right. But let me take at least one more shot at him as he comes in. I won't kill him. All I want to do is to cripple him. [*Gets out of bed, but before he can find a missile, there is yet another knock, this time very urgent, and he gives it up*] Come in!

[*The door opens ever so little.* RUFINIUS *thrusts his hand through the crack. When nothing strikes it, he follows with his head, very warily. As he comes in* PAULA *draws in her head*]

RUFINIUS

Your Majesty's pardon! I ask pardon!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Severely*] Well, alarm clock?

RUFINIUS

A very important matter. [*He glances about him, his eyes alighting on* LUCIA] For your Majesty's private ear. Perhaps it would be better—

HELIOGABALUS

Let's hear it.

RUFINIUS

[*He comes closer*] I really think—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Testily*] Go on with your story, kill-joy.

[RUFINIUS *drops his voice so that his words are not audible. The purport of the dialogue must be revealed by* HELIOGABALUS' *answers and exclamations. While it is elaborately going on, with the backs of both turned to the bed,* PAULA *pokes out her head and listens intently.* LUCIA, *sitting up in bed, also tries hard to hear, but it is improbable that she catches more than an occasional word*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Aloud*] Make it short. I'm very busy. [RUFINIUS *whispers, and* HELIOGABALUS *suddenly grows interested and somewhat alarmed*] What do they want? . . . I thought they were all sound asleep over in the North Wing. . . . She *isn't?* What! A riot—and Paula not in it? Then where *is* she? . . . Go find her. I know she's behind it. . . . And get the rest to bed. Drunk or sober, get them to bed. . . . Tell them I absolutely order it.

[*A noise outside, and a woman's scream*]

LUCIA

[*From the bed, in alarm*] What was that?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Over his shoulder, reassuringly*] Nothing, my dear. Stay in bed like a nice girl.

LUCIA

[*Half out*] You are having some one killed!

HELIOGABALUS

Bosh! Stay in bed! [*To* RUFINIUS] Get them back in the North Wing, and post a guard at—

[*He is cut short by a terrific uproar outside. Women screaming. The sound of a bugle. The clank of swords. Loud and prolonged military orders. A man's voice:* "Let go!" *A woman's:* "Stick him in the eye!"

[HELIOGABALUS *and* RUFINIUS *turn toward the closed door and gape at it dumbfounded, apparently disinclined to open it and face the music. As they move toward it irresolutely,* PAULA *rolls from under the bed, leaps to her feet, dashes between them, blows a loud whistle, gets to the door, and throws it open*]

PAULA

Come in, girls! I am with you!

[*At this,* LUCIA, *still in bed, screams shrilly, and* HELIOGABALUS *and* RUFINIUS *fall back. As the door swings open* CÆLESTIS *bounds in with a Prætorian guard dragging behind her. At sight of the imperial bedchamber, he is so far overcome that he lets go and rushes out again. In the door-*

way, he collides with AQUILIA SEVERA, ANNIA FAUSTINA *and* ALINIA, *all in a great state of excitement. They knock him over, and leap into the room, glaring about them truculently*]

PAULA

[*Levelling a melodramatic forefinger at* HELIOGABALUS] There he is! He was plotting to poison all of us!

[*Obviously,* PAULA *strikes* HELIOGABALUS *with a good deal of terror. He backs away from her, and keeps a safe distance while she declaims. She takes the centre of the stage at once, the other wives grouped behind her. After her accusation there is a moment of electric silence. She fixes* HELIOGABALUS *with a glare*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Weakly*] Oh, surely you exaggerate. I—

PAULA

Me first, and then the rest of you. I heard it with my own ears. And I heard a lot besides. Such talk! I lay there under the bed blushing.

LUCIA

[*Sitting up in bed*] You *ought* to blush, you—you—you—

[*She is overcome by indignation*]

PAULA

Out of my bed, you—you—you!

LUCIA

You—you—you—!

PAULA

No more of this Christian monkey-business! Into the street you go, where you came from!

LUCIA

Do you *dare*—!

PAULA

Yes, the street. I saw you myself. I saw you haranguing those loafers, and singing songs, and passing a soup-plate for coppers.

LUCIA

[*Leaping from bed*] I refuse to allow you to say that. I was preaching the Word. I was seeking souls.

PAULA

[*Moving toward her truculently*] Um-hum! I know what you were seeking. You had one eye on the Palace all the while.

LUCIA

[*In high indignation*] There is not a word of truth in it. It is infamous.

PAULA

Bah!

THE OTHER WIVES

Bah! Bah!

LUCIA

I was on my Master's business.

PAULA

And I am here on my *own* business. I'll give you two minutes to get out of this room—and stay out.

[HELIOGABALUS, *observing that both sides have forgotten him, gives a sardonic wink and tiptoes upstage toward his bed. He carefully and quietly crawls in, fixes the pillow behind him, and settles down to observe the row.* RUFINIUS *sneaks toward the door*]

LUCIA

Never in the world! This is *my* room now. It has been sanctified!

PAULA

Sanctified nothing. It's *my* room—*our* room. You never were *legally* married to the Emperor. You are nothing but a—

LUCIA

Oh, what a lie! I was married by my own pastor.

PAULA

Yes, by one of your Christian street-preachers. I've seen him! He looks like a drum-major. But this is Rome, and—

LUCIA

[*Explosively*] Well, when it comes to *that*, what of yourself? Where did *you* come from? Doesn't

everybody know that you were a chamber-maid in Alexandria?

PAULA

[*Sputtering*] I was nothing of the sort, you—! My father was a general in the army.

ANNIA

My father was Governor of Macedonia.

LUCIA

[*Leaping at the chance*] Oh, *was* he? And who was your first husband?

[*The boaster is abashed*]

LUCIA

I'll tell you. His name was Pomponius Bassus—and he was *hanged.*

[*The boaster begins to snivel, and* PAULA *comes to the rescue*]

PAULA

[*Grandly*] And he deserved it. The way he treated that poor, dear—

LUCIA

Yes, and he was hanged six weeks *after* that hussy came here and tempted poor Cæsar.

[HELIOGABALUS *turns over in the bed*]

PAULA

A thumping lie! I remember every detail of it. It wasn't six weeks at all . . . And now you throw on your clothes and get out of here! Out with you!

LUCIA

I shall do absolutely nothing of the sort.

PAULA

This free love stuff has got to stop. And it's *my* place to see that it—

LUCIA

It's your place to turn all these heathen women out of the palace, and then turn yourself out, and so save the Emperor from such sinful—

PAULA

You're a common man-teaser.

LUCIA

You are an old scare-crow!

PAULA

I'll have you thrown out of the door!

LUCIA

I'll have *you* thrown out of the window!

PAULA

You are a loose woman!

LUCIA

You *used* to be a loose woman!

[*The shot injures poor old* PAULA *so badly that she jumps at* LUCIA *and grabs her by the arm, shaking her furiously*]

PAULA

I *dare* you to say such a thing!

LUCIA

Let me go, you—you—infidel! I'll—

[*She wrests herself free and deals* PAULA *a clout over the head.* PAULA *lunges at her with vast ferocity, but she quickly delivers another blow. A huge uproar.* HELIOGABALUS *stretches his neck to see it.* RUFINIUS *several times steps forward as if to interfere, but always thinks better of it.* PAULA *has the advantage of weight, but* LUCIA *is by far the more agile. Various shrill exclamations* "Oh, you will, will you? Take that! Ouch! Oh, my ear! Whoop!" etc. *To the extreme right, beyond the large bed, is the fleet of coat-racks, each enormously laden with feminine finery.* PAULA *backs* LUCIA *into them, but straightway comes to grief herself, for* LUCIA *upsets the nearest upon her, and, when she falls, heaves another after it.* PAULA, *completely buried in clothes, yells for help, and the three other wives, who have so far done no more than encourage her with shouts, now come to the attack.* LUCIA, *leaping behind another rack, pushes it at them, and it halts them. Then, seeing herself outdone by numbers, she calls for help herself*]

LUCIA

Oh, oh! Help! Help, Cæsar! Save me!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Crawling from the bed quietly and idiotically*] Did I hear you call? What's the trouble? Have you dropped something?

LUCIA

[*At the top of her lungs*] These filthy creatures are trying to kill me!

PAULA

[*Under the pile of clothes*] She *bit* me!

[*The other wives unearth* PAULA *and stand her on her feet. It is seen that she has a black eye.* LUCIA *retreats to the door at the left and stands there at bay. The other wives haul* PAULA *toward the centre of the stage.* HELIOGABALUS *crosses to a place between* LUCIA *and the others*]

LUCIA

[*Hysterically*] That old washtub tried to stab me.

PAULA

[*Breaking from the others, her hand on her black eye*] It's a dirty lie! She kicked me in the—

LUCIA

She called me awful names!

CÆLESTIS

I saw her draw a dagger!

HELIOGABALUS

Stop! Be quiet! What sort of bar-room row is this? Do you know where you are?

PAULA

I am in my own room. This room is mine.

AQUILIA

And ours.

PAULA

Yes, and theirs.

LUCIA

[*Furiously*] It's mine!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Decisively*] It's *mine.* [*Coolly, with judicial poise*] And it wouldn't be going too far, ladies, to say that I am scandalized by such proceedings. I really am. In all my experience, embracing many long years and the whole Roman empire, from Britain in the far North to Persia in the extreme—

PAULA

[*Bursting into tears*] You bring in a woman off the streets—

LUCIA

[*In tears, too*] You let an old unbelieving harridan, a disreputable old—

HELIOGABALUS

As I was saying, ladies, in all my—

PAULA

I demand that that creature be put out!

LUCIA

I demand my rights as your wife!

HELIOGABALUS

Really, my dear, you must excuse me. On this point the principles of jurisprudence are quite clear. A judge is plainly forbidden to sit in a case in which he has an interest. If he has an interest in *one* side it is enough. If he has an interest in *both* sides, then surely—

LUCIA

Both sides?

HELIOGABALUS

Exactly.

LUCIA

Do you mean to say that you are interested in the side of this—this fat old—this—?

HELIOGABALUS

Rid your mind of prejudice, my dear. Observe the thing calmly and judicially. Granting all you say—though I am by no means granting it—the fact remains nevertheless that according to Roman—if not Christian—law, I am married to this lady—these ladies—and that that marriage—those marriages—is and are still legally binding. With the fact go certain obligations. I may deplore, as much as you do, their somewhat unwise and emotional appear—

LUCIA

Oh, what a—!

HELIOGABALUS

All I ask is that you try to—

LUCIA

Then you don't love me.

ANNIA

The idea!

HELIOGABALUS

I protest, my dear, that—

LUCIA

[*Bursting into tears*] Then you don't love me! Then you told me a falsehood! You aren't a Christian! I—I—I—

[*Quite undone by her feelings, she suddenly hides her face in her hands, darts to the left-hand door, swings it open, runs out, and slams it after her*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Starting toward the door after her*] My dear girl, I—

PAULA

[*Resolutely*] Let her go!

HELIOGABALUS

But she'll catch cold out there. Remember, she has on a very light—

CÆLESTIS

Very light nothing. It's flannel. Anyway, she deserves to catch cold.

HELIOGABALUS

Really, Cælestis, you are quite savage.

PAULA

Who wouldn't be, the way we have been treated? [*Conciliatingly*] But I say nothing against *you.* I know how you are when such a minx gets after you.

HELIOGABALUS

Let us not discuss it.

PAULA

[*Bitterly*] No; what's the use? I have had eighteen years of it—first in the East and now here in Rome. I know you can't help it, poor old dear. One glance at such a doll and you are gone. [*To the other wives*] And now let us try to forget it. It's getting late.

[*Instantly they begin to take off their outer garments and let down their hair*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*In alarm*] What are you doing?

PAULA

[*Grimly*] Getting ready to go to bed. We are sleepy.

HELIOGABALUS

But, my dear—look, there is Rufinius still in the room!

[*The wives glance at* RUFINIUS, *scream and try to hide themselves.* RUFINIUS, *much embarrassed, ducks out of the door*]

PAULA

[*With a bitter grin*] Well, now he's gone.

[*She continues disrobing*]

HELIOGABALUS

But, but—this is really quite irregular. Let us wait until we are all a bit less excited, as it were. Now be a good girl. [*Wheedlingly*] Go back to bed in the North Wing, and let me collect my thoughts a bit.

PAULA

Here I am, and here I stay.

[*She throws her girdle over one of the coat-racks*]

HELIOGABALUS

But in a minute Lucia'll be coming back, and then—

[*He frantically begins dressing and racing against the undressers*]

PAULA

If she comes back, I'll bite her again.

[*She kicks off her sandals*]

AQUILIA

[*Emerging in nothing save a short shift*] Do you think *we* would sleep in a bed with such a creature?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Drawing his tunic over his head in wild alarm*] But the poor girl must sleep *somewhere.*

PAULA

Let her sleep out in the corridor.

[*She drops her outer dress and stands forth in a grotesque chemise, decorated with little blue ribbons. The sight so far appals* HELIOGABALUS *that disgust is converted into indignation and indignation into resolution*]

HELIOGABALUS

Very well, then. If *she* must sleep out there, then *I* sleep out there too!

[*He is now pretty fully dressed and struggles into his sandals*]

PAULA

[*Somewhat shaken*] You're not going to leave us?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Adjusting his tunic*] I *am* going to leave *us!*

PAULA

Leave us here all alone?

HELIOGABALUS

Aren't there four of you?

PAULA

But with not a man in the room?

ANNIA

[*Whimpering*] Suppose burglars should break in?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Sarcastically*] Paula can deal with them.

PAULA

[*In tears*] No, I can't!

HELIOGABALUS

Then let Rufinius come in. He can have my bed.

PAULA

[*With a yell*] The idea! Do you accuse me of—

HELIOGABALUS

[*At the door to the extreme left*] I accuse you of nothing. [*Opening the door*] And now—

[*As he throws the door open,* LUCIA *is revealed. She has been eavesdropping and is much distraught*]

LUCIA

[*In a faint voice*] I am cold.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Uncertainly*] I was just coming out to—

LUCIA

[*Catching sight of the wives—*PAULA *in the middle of the floor in her chemise and the other three in*

bed—she gives a scream and totters toward the centre of the stage. There she does a grand faint at PAULA'S *feet*]

PAULA

[*Leaping back*] Oh, my God!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Solemnly*] You have killed her. She has frozen to death.

PAULA

[*Alarmed*] I did nothing of the sort. She went out of her own free will.

AQUILIA

[*Jumping from bed*] Get her into bed, quick!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Reaching down and grabbing her under the arms*] Get her into *my* bed.

[*The other wives pile out, and help* PAULA *and* HELIOGABALUS *to carry her to his bed*]

PAULA

[*Snivelling*] I wouldn't have hurt her for the world.

HELIOGABALUS

Tell Rufinius to get those two doctors I pardoned.

[PAULA, *still in her chemise, rushes to the door, flings it open and exits*]

CÆLESTIS

Rub her wrists.

ANNIA

Have you a key? Try a key at the back of her neck.

HELIOGABALUS

Cover her up!

AQUILIA

Try massaging her ears.

HELIOGABALUS

Go get some water.

[AQUILIA *rushes to the door, flinging it open just in time to admit* PISO *and* POLORUS. *They come in at a gallop, followed by* RUFINIUS, PAULA *and a slave pushing a wheeled table covered with huge bottles, rolls of plasters, etc. The scene must move at lightning speed*]

PISO

[*Idiotically, in great excitement*] Which is the patient? [*He looks from one wife to another, and then observes* LUCIA *on the bed*] Ah!

POLORUS

[*Crowding to the front*] Pass me the brandy.

PISO

Brandy? On what theory?

POLORUS

This is no time for theories, idiot! The patient needs help.

PISO

Well, how are you going to help her until you establish the diagnosis?

POLORUS

What could be plainer? A horse-doctor could see that she has fainted.

[*He proceeds to pour out a large drink of the brandy*]

PISO

[*Very learnedly*] Suppose it is *coma?* Suppose she has been *poisoned?*

[PAULA *gives a shriek*]

POLORUS

Nonsense! Then where is your cyanosis?

[*He proceeds to lift* LUCIA'S *head and pour some of the brandy into her mouth*]

PISO

Stop! I forbid it!

[*During this rapid dialogue the three other wives flutter about, and* HELIOGABALUS *and* PAULA *crowd close to the bed*]

POLORUS

[*Continuing with the brandy*] I stand on my Hippocratic oath. I insist on the brandy.

PISO

I appeal to your decency. Don't kill the patient. [PAULA *screams again*] Let me feel her pulse.

POLORUS

Stand back! You are suffocating her!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Losing patience*] Here, fools! Give me the goblet.

[*He seizes it and pours half of its contents down* LUCIA'S *throat. She gasps, coughs, gags and then gradually sits up. As she opens her eyes she sights* PAULA]

LUCIA

[*An exclamation of terror*] Oh! Oh! Take her away!

[PAULA *hops back in great confusion*]

PAULA

[*Ingratiatingly*] Don't be afraid, dearie.

LUCIA

[*Screams*] She tried to stab me!

PAULA

[*In great excitement*] The idea! I never did anything—

LUCIA

I can see the devil standing behind her!

[PAULA *swings about quickly to look behind her, loses her balance, throws up her arms, and falls down with a crash*]

PAULA

Help!

POLORUS

[*Rushing to the rescue*] Brandy! Brandy!
[*A great hub-bub. The wives crowd around*]

PISO

[*Shrilly, over the tumult*] I forbid it!

HELIOGABALUS

Give her air!
[POLORUS *applies the brandy jug to* PAULA'S *lips and she begins to gurgle, gag and blubber*]

PAULA

[*Still gasping, and rising to a sitting position on the floor*] That Christian tried to put a spell on me. She has the evil eye.

LUCIA

[*Shrilly, from the bed*] There *are* devils in her! She is like the Gadarene swine.

PAULA

[*Struggling to her feet, assisted by the doctors, the other wives and* HELIOGABALUS] Liar!

LUCIA

She is possessed by demons, Cæsar.

PAULA

[*Again in great fright*] Let me out of here! I feel something coming over me!

AQUILIA

I feel it, too. I—I—

[*She flops across the big bed.* POLORUS *leaps to the rescue with the brandy-jug, but as he reaches her she sits up and knocks it out of his hand*]

PISO

[*Prancing about*] Where is the ammonia? Who has the ammonia bottle?

[*He searches for it on the wheeled table, but can't find it*]

PAULA

Let me out! Let me out!

POLORUS

Ammonia your grandmother! Where are the sedatives? Who took the poppy-water? Where is the poppy-water?

[*He makes a wild search for it*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Quietly*] I think you're right. They need something to calm their nerves. [*He finds and seizes the bottle*] Ah, here it is! Ammonia would half kill them.

PISO

I protest!

PAULA

I want to get out of here.

[RUFINIUS *tries to calm her*]

HELIOGABALUS

One second, darling. [*As* POLORUS *offers her a goblet of the poppy-water*] Now be a nice little girl, and swallow this medicine. It will make you dream beautifully.

PAULA

[*Dubiously*] What is it, doctor?

HELIOGABALUS

Never ask a doctor what anything is. Remember your manners. He mightn't know. It will make you dream that you are seventeen, and in love with a gladiator.

PAULA

You're sure it won't hurt me?

POLORUS

Oh, absolutely no.

PISO

I—

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* PISO] Silence! [*To* PAULA] Now down with it.

[*She drinks it, and at once grows somewhat calmer. Gradually she succumbs, and by the time she goes out she is very sleepy*]

PAULA

[*Smacking her lips*] It tastes like—it tastes like—

POLORUS

Exactly. And now for the other ladies. Who's next?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Sharply*] Cælestis!

[*The wife on the bed struggles up and comes forward*]

POLORUS

[*The goblet in hand*] Ready?

HELIOGABALUS

Shut your eyes!

[CÆLESTIS *swallows the dose without a word*]

POLORUS

[*Refilling the goblet*] Next!

HELIOGABALUS

Come, Aquilia.

AQUILIA

[*Doubtfully*] It won't make me fat?

POLORUS

Oh, surely not.

AQUILIA

You're positive?

HELIOGABALUS

Positive. Down with it. [*She swallows the dose*] And now little Annia. One, two, three!

[POLORUS *fills the goblet again and it goes down immediately*]

POLORUS

Ah! So much for that!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Herding the wives toward the door*] And now you girls try to get some rest, and leave the doctors with poor Lucia. I'm afraid it may be a case for immediate operation. They'll have to examine her from head to foot.

LUCIA

[*From the bed*] I won't have any operation! I won't be examined from head to foot! The power of the spirit is enough.

PISO

Oh, hardly.

LUCIA

[*Petulantly*] I refuse to be cut up!

HELIOGABALUS

Now, now, be calm. Look at the other girls. [*To* PAULA] And now try to get some rest. I'll come out to see you immediately after the operation. [*Moving her toward the door, the others following*] Take things easily for—

PAULA

I feel so—

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, yes, but you'll feel better presently.

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* POLORUS *in a hoarse whisper*] Give them all another dose—a double dose. Especially Paula. She has the stomach of a policeman.

[*The wives wobble out, followed by* POLORUS, *the slave with the table of medicines, and* RUFINIUS. *Only* PISO *remains*]

PISO

[*Ingratiatingly*] Your Majesty's excellent suggestion of an operation is—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Turning with great deliberation, and kicking* PISO *in the rear*] Out!

[PISO, *after an instant of amazement, leaps for the door and disappears*]

LUCIA

That Paula is an old hyena, Cæsar. She tried to bite me.

HELIOGABALUS

[*He seats himself on the edge of the big bed, his legs swinging in the open space between the two beds. His manner is that of weariness and resignation*] Yes, she's somewhat—explosive. I am afraid she's sometimes unwise in the use of — er, stimulants?

LUCIA

Afraid? She's been drunk for months—ever since—

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, she's taken it very hard.

LUCIA

[*Somewhat oratorically*] Wine is a mocker. Strong drink is raging.

HELIOGABALUS

A mocker, yes—but also a consoler. Don't forget that poor old Paula must have time to get used to things. I daresay the new regulations rather oppress her.

LUCIA

You mean she longs for all those old dissipations—those banquets every night, and all that worldly carnality—and this room full of those awful women?

HELIOGABALUS

Exactly, though I doubt that she'd describe it in just that way. You see, she was brought up in Alexandria—a rather lively burg. It's all a matter of training. Here she had certain responsibilities, certain interesting duties—

LUCIA

Yes, I know what those duties were. They were sinful in the sight of God.

HELIOGABALUS

Perhaps. Nevertheless, they occupied her mind. Let us be just to her. She was competent. She knew

her business. I never had any trouble with those girls while *she* was in charge of them.

LUCIA

Those scarlet women!

HELIOGABALUS

Now you are exaggerating. They are all quite respectable. My marriage to every one of them is, as I've told you, sound in Roman law.

LUCIA

But not in the eye of God. The Scripture says "A bishop shall have but one wife."

HELIOGABALUS

But I'm not a bishop.

LUCIA

Well, surely no one ought to be allowed more wives than a bishop.

HELIOGABALUS

Granted. But here they are.

LUCIA

Turn them away. Read the Word.

HELIOGABALUS

[*A bit irritated*] Yes, yes; I have read it. The theory is very lovely. It has affected me greatly; I have adopted it as you know. But here I have these girls legally on my hands, and surely you wouldn't ask me to—

LUCIA

You should be glad to get rid of them. Such a pack of—of—

HELIOGABALUS

Now, now, I must really forbid you. Paula, of course, is open to a certain criticism, at least æsthetically. And Cælestis is probably no stunner. But among the others there are certainly a number who—

LUCIA

[*Tearfully*] You don't love me in the proper Christian way!

HELIOGABALUS

What nonsense! I love you to an extreme degree. [*He takes up and kisses her hand*] My affection for you is really colossal. But let us be just. Surely it's absurd to say that *all* of them are—well, offensive. There are surely exceptions.

LUCIA

[*Resolutely*] Not one.

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, come now. For example, there is Dacia. I haven't seen her for these long months, but I remember her quite clearly Surely Dacia has a certain charm. She is young, she has a good complexion, she sings very acceptably, and she—

LUCIA

I see what is the matter. You are homesick for her and her kind. For her and the old infidel life.

HELIOGABALUS

Not at all. I merely remember her. That's all. I merely remember. A toothsome girl. But a lady. Her father was a philosopher in Athens . . . she wasn't in that crowd. She is naturally affectionate.

LUCIA

And kissing all the time, I suppose. Never a moment for the things of the spirit. Always the flesh.

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, by no means. I really wouldn't have permitted it. I quite agree with you there. Such things may be overdone. At my age.

LUCIA

But you like it, don't you?

HELIOGABALUS

[*Looking at her sharply*] Yes—on occasion. But there is where I agree with you: that is the precise reason why the thing should be limited. [*A bit wistfully*] If one kissed too much, one would be too happy. And that, of course, wouldn't do at all.

LUCIA

The happiness of this life is as dust.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Grudgingly*] So you tell me.

LUCIA

The happiness to come is eternal.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, I hope so. But, you see, my trouble is old Paula's. I was brought up wrong. I suppose it is incurable. I notice, at times, an almost irresistible lasciviousness—what you call worldliness. [*Amorously*] When I see you there in your nightie I forget all about Christianity and can hardly resist the temptation to throw my arms around you and give you a hug. I know it's wrong, but there it is.

LUCIA

[*Somewhat shaken*] Well, I shouldn't call it lasciviousness. And it isn't exactly wrong.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Ironically*] No?

LUCIA

The Scriptures say—

HELIOGABALUS

Ah? Then let us be glad they approve it, little pot-pie. It is pleasant to be virtuous—that is, more or less.

LUCIA

[*Demurely after a pause*] Do you want to kiss me?

HELIOGABALUS

[*He begins slowly to take off his tunic. As he answers, it is over his head*] I am perfectly willing. But, I warn you, I'm not going to stand any more Christian kisses. And what's more, if I'm interrupted any more by any low-comedy Palais Royal knocking on that dog-gone door just as I am on the point of—

[*He is duly cut short by a loud knocking on the door. He tries to get out of his tunic quickly, and then, thinking better of it, decides to let it down again*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Wrathfully*] What is it now? [*An unintelligible answer from without*] Hey? [*Another mumble*] I can't hear you. Come in.

[*Enter* RUFINIUS. *He stops near the door and glances at* LUCIA *dubiously*]

RUFINIUS

I came in, Majesty, to report—

[*He stops*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Coming down toward* RUFINIUS] What! I'm good and damn sick of this "I came in to report, Majesty," just as I'm about to— What's up? More trouble?

RUFINIUS

No, Majesty. The ladies are all asleep.

HELIOGABALUS

Hear, hear! And he "comes in to report, Majesty" just as Majesty is about to—

RUFINIUS

The Empress Paula is breathing very heavily, Majesty. The doctors are trying to revive her.

HELIOGABALUS

[*In a sudden rage*] What! Revive her! Seven thousand loud damns. Tell them to give her another dose of the same—give them another dose all 'round. Tell those quacks that—the infernal boobies! Off go their toes if a single patient wakes—and both ears. Now quick, before they revive her!

[*Pushes* RUFINIUS *toward the door*]

RUFINIUS

As you order, Majesty. But there is another matter.

HELIOGABALUS

What is it, foul fool?

RUFINIUS

Another one of the ladies has come over from the North Wing—Dacia.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Softening*] Ah, Dacia! What does she want? Surely *she*—

RUFINIUS

Oh, not at all. She asked me to inquire how her Majesty is, and if you yourself are feeling quite well.

HELIOGABALUS

Ah, very thoughtful of her. Tell her I am quite well. And don't forget to thank her. Remember, Rufinius, give her my thanks.

RUFINIUS

[*Going to the door*] As you order, Emperor.

HELIOGABALUS

Tell her not to neglect her music lessons. And—but just say I may want to see her for an instant tomorrow—some business—of state—that I had forgotten.

RUFINIUS

As ordered, Majesty.

[*He goes out*]

LUCIA

You are still thinking of that heathen Dacia.

HELIOGABALUS

Nonsense, sweet potato. You are really quite absurd. [*Suddenly irritated*] Damn it all, a man must be polite.

LUCIA

[*Jealously*] But you used to love her before I converted you to the Faith.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Starting to take off his tunic again*] Ah, who knows? Love—what is it? A sort of optical delusion, an enchantment—almost alcoholic.

[*He gets it over his head, and stands rubbing his bare arms and shoulders*]

LUCIA

Love comes from the soul.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, even the soul takes a hack at it.

[*He starts to climb into the small bed*]

LUCIA

[*Loudly*] Where *are* you going?

HELIOGABALUS

[*His leg in mid-air, coaxing in baby-like tone*] Please! I don't want to sleep over there—[*indicating the big bed*]—in Siberia. It's so cold—and when I get cold it always gives me my stomach-ache.

LUCIA

No! One must not think of the flesh, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

But you're my wife, aren't you? You wouldn't have me freeze to death?

LUCIA

But not a pagan wife. I am a Christian wife.

HELIOGABALUS

Well, doesn't a Christian wife promise to cherish her husband? [*Still coaxing, and shivering*] Please!

LUCIA

No.

HELIOGABALUS

Please, please!

LUCIA

Again, no, Cæsar.

HELIOGABALUS

[*With a weary sigh, crawling into the big bed*] Lucia, I can't understand you or this Christianity either. What's the idea of trying to make people miserable by forbidding them to do what they want to, and then, when they're unhappy about it, telling them they're awfully happy but don't know it?

[LUCIA *rolls over and does not reply.* HELIOGABALUS *sighs*]

HELIOGABALUS

Anyway, I don't seem to get used to this going to bed sober. [*He props himself up in bed, and rambles on without paying much heed to* LUCIA] Now, you were saying that love is of the soul. But see what a conclusion it brings you to: then even old Paula must have a soul, for old Paula used to love me.

LUCIA

[*Sleepily*] Paula, too, has an immortal soul.

HELIOGABALUS

The gods forbid! [*Humorously*] But what of, er—what of, say Dacia, for example?

LUCIA

[*Yawning*] This Dacia, too, has a soul.

HELIOGABALUS

Nobly spoken. And much better news! [*Half dreamily*] But what is this so-called soul you speak of? Is it a gas? Has it got length, breadth, thickness? Is the soul in the body, or the body in the soul? When I used to cut a Christian into two halves, which half was the soul in? Was *it* divided too? Well, then, suppose I had him run through a sausage cutter, and he came out, say, in four million pieces: was the soul in four million pieces, too? You say that the soul re-enters the body on the day of judgment. Well, suppose I take two Jews and cut off their heads, and put the head of A on the body of B, and vice versa. Does the soul of A go into the body of A or into the head of A, which is on the body of B? If it goes into the head, is it responsible for the sins of the body of B? [*He reaches over and, slyly watching* LUCIA *out of the corner of his eye, pours out a goblet of the brandy which the doctors have left there, slowly sipping it with much lip-smacking as he goes on*] Do you follow me?

LUCIA

[*Half asleep*] Oh, how you talk, Cæsar!

HELIOGABALUS

Talk? Talking is my trade, little icicle. Talk is the heart's blood of politics. . . . And of love. I used to have even greater skill than I have today. He had a smooth and slippery tongue, had Heliogabalus. Years ago, when I was a lieutenant in the army, I used to—[*sighs*] Well, they were all willing: my conscience is perfectly clear. As the lawyers say, *Caveat emptor*. When a girl has a taste for epigrams she must be careful: a man of my wit is dangerous. I'll never forget my poor dear first wife—good old Marcia. It was an epigram that made her fall in love with me. I remember the circumstances perfectly. She was complaining that love was beyond her comprehension—that it was ineffable, indescribable, transcendental. "Love," *I* replied, with droll perspicacity, "Love," I replied, "is the triumph of imagination over intelligence."

[*He chuckles*]

LUCIA

[*Yawns audibly, and turns over*]

HELIOGABALUS

You interrupt me, cold darling. What I was about to say is that poor old Marcia laughed so hard she rolled clear out of bed. An old joke—as old as the Babylonians. But fact! You should have heard the

bump when she landed on her—[*a sidelong glance*] —her upholstery. I had to haul her back into bed. [*He sips again*] Ah, love, indeed! A short preface to a long book! [*He pauses and waits for appreciation. No sound comes from* LUCIA. *He goes on in a slightly louder voice*] Love is like war: easy to begin but very hard to stop. [*Another inquiring glance at* LUCIA] When loves dies there is never any funeral: the corpse remains in the house. [*Another*] A woman in love is less modest than a man: she has less to be ashamed of. [*A longish pause. He takes a deep draught*] Love is the delusion that one woman differs from another. [LUCIA *is still silent. He lifts himself to his elbow and regards her contemplatively. He calls her softly*] Lucia! Sweet Lucia! . . . Asleep! [*A sigh*] Christianity is fatal to the—er—epigram. How Marcia used to giggle! And little Dacia! Dacia has a sense of humour. An intelligent girl, Dacia. And how her nose puckers when she is a bit—squiffed. Somehow, I—[*He empties the goblet and composes himself. The regular breathing of* LUCIA *can be heard*] This Christianity may be all right in the daytime, but at night—[*Suddenly, from somewhere below the window there comes the soft, low sound of a girl's voice, raised in song. It is a song of love and passion, and* HELIOGABALUS *sits up in bed to listen. Toward the end he glances at* LUCIA, *scarcely concealing a rising aversion. The song ended, he settles himself, wets his lips, and smiles amorously*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*In a caressing whisper*] Dacia!

CURTAIN

ACT III

ACT III

The next night.

A corridor in the palace. It stretches longitudinally across the stage and is rather narrow. In the wall to the back there is a wide and high arch, covered with heavy hangings of imperial purple, showing two large embroidered H's, with wreaths above them, in gold. The solid wall of the corridor, seen to the two sides of the central hangings, is of coloured marble. The hangings conceal the state banquet hall, and the corridor is the emperor's means of getting to the latter from his private apartments. All decorations are simple, but of the utmost richness.

During the whole act, down to the last scene, sounds of revelry come from the banquet hall—laughter, music and the clinking of goblets—now faintly and now loudly.

As the curtain rises PISO *and* POLORUS *enter, followed by a slave pushing their rolling table of medicines and instruments. They are in long white tunics, reaching below the knees, and with short sleeves—the early Roman equivalent of modern operating gowns.*

PISO

[*To the slave*] Here, Ambrose, shove it to this side.

[*The slave runs the table to the left, halts it by the back wall, and exits*]

POLORUS

[*Officiously*] Where is the headache powder?

PISO

[*Reaching to the shelf beneath the table, he brings up a huge blue bottle*] Here you are. Do you think we have enough?

POLORUS

It's enough to kill them, but I doubt that it's enough to cure them, once they get started.

PISO

Well, if we run out of it, we can give them some cholera mixture. They'll never know the difference.

POLORUS

[*Busily arranging the bottles*] All this does me good, my boy. It makes me young again.

PISO

Do you think the moral movement is really over?

POLORUS

If it isn't, then why this good old-fashioned banquet? Why all the old crowd? Why all the old girls? I suspect that Paula arranged the whole thing. Have you seen the list of guests?

PISO

No.

POLORUS

Well, not a tank is missing. Every zinc-lined stomach and copper-plated kidney in Rome is here. By the way, have we got enough stomach-pumps?

PISO

[*Indicating them*] Here are six.

POLORUS

Maybe that will be enough. [*He roots among the medicines*] I have a feeling that this will finish the Christian wife. She'll never stand for an old-time banquet.

PISO

Then let us thank all the gods. If Christianity ever actually got on its legs, the doctoring business would go to pot. All this praying and fasting and going to bed at ten o'clock is fatal to pathology. The aim of medicine is to save a man from the just consequences of his own vices. If he gives up his vices, then—

POLORUS

But he never does. All he ever comes to is the exchange of one vice for another. This praying that you mention is a vice. Fasting is a vice. Going to bed at ten o'clock is a vice.

PISO

Maybe so. But I am speaking medically. The medicine that *we* studied was designed for certain ends. It supposes the existence of certain vices.

You and I know, for example, how to treat a man who has eaten too much or who hasn't had sleep *enough.* But what of the man who has fasted, and at the same time got too *much* sleep? There you stand medicine on its head. And I am too old to learn it all over again.

POLORUS

[*Argumentatively*] You make imaginary difficulties, Dr. Piso. Simply give him a dose of salts, say I, and trust to luck. You talk as if a physician had to *cure* his patient. Nonsense. All he has to do is to *try* to cure him.

PISO

[*Bridling*] Is *that* so? Then how do you—

[*He is cut short by the entrance of* CAIUS MACRINUS *from the left.* CAIUS *lumbers toward* PISO *and is seen to be already far gone in liquor*]

CAIUS

Say, Doctor—

PISO

Why, Commander! What brings you here?

CAIUS

Ain't this the night of the banquet? I thought this was the night of the banquet. If this ain't the night of the banquet, then I—

PISO

Of course it is. But how did you get *here?*

CAIUS

Ain't this the palace? I thought this was the palace. I saw a lot of girls going in the basement and so I thought it was the palace.

PISO

So it is. But this is the Emperor's private corridor. You ought to have gone the other way, through the atrium.

CAIUS

Excuse me, gentleman. I apologize. [*He attempts a right-about-face*] Which way did you say? I thought I was in the palace. I saw a lot of cuties going into the basement and so I thought it was the palace. [*Suddenly pulling himself up*] But say, Doctor, I knew I wanted to see you about something. You are Dr. Piso, ain't you?

PISO

I am *the* Dr. Piso.

CAIUS

I remember you that time I had that carbuncle. Where was it? Somewhere in Gaul. My, my! How the years do skip along! Here it's July again—[*He pauses uncertainly*] Is it? Is it July again?

PISO

[*Professionally*] You say you desire to consult me, Commander?

CAIUS

Doctor, you know what it is—this sea-faring life.

I thought my legs would give out first. But it turns out to be my stomach.

PISO

You have indigestion?

CAIUS

No, sir! I can digest anything. I could eat an alligator. Tail and all.

PISO

But—

CAIUS

[*Looking about him cautiously*] Shhhh! I'm coming to it! I can *eat* anything, but—but—

[*His voice quavers*]

PISO

But you're not what you used to be at—

CAIUS

[*He nods mournfully*] Half a dozen bottles of wine, and I'm not worth a damn. The fact is, I am almost a teetotaler—practically. I hardly drink a thing—scarcely. [*He sighs boozily*] Think of what's ahead of me tonight. They're all here—the military, the judiciary, the Senate. If I drink with all those gold-fish, then I'll be laid up tomorrow, and maybe die. And if I don't drink, then I disgrace the navy.

PISO

Too bad. But maybe I can help you.

CAIUS

That's what I was getting at, Doctor. I remember, out in Asia Minor, how those slick Persians would take a hooch of something or other, and then they were ready for anything. The point is, what *was* it?

PISO

Olive oil.

POLORUS

Ammonia.

PISO

Ammonia your uncle!

POLORUS

[*Bitingly*] Yes, ammonia one's uncle! An ounce in a glass of milk, before *or* after.

CAIUS

Could I take them both?

PISO

Yes, if you are crazy.

POLORUS

Why not? The ammonia will fix him, and the olive oil won't kill him. [*Busying himself at the table*] Let us mix them.

[*He pours the olive oil and ammonia into a beaker, and starts to stir the mixture*]

CAIUS

[*Getting affectionate and placing his arm around*

POLORUS' *neck*] Oh, Doctor! Give me a big one! Don't tease me with a pony!

POLORUS

This is the regular size for elephants and gladiators. Now—there you are—down with it!

[*He hands* CAIUS *the beaker.* CAIUS *downs it at a fearful gulp, and comes up spluttering and rolling his eyes*]

CAIUS

[*Faintly*] Is there a chaser?

PISO

No. Let it alone. The fire will go out of itself.

[CAIUS *attempts to speak, but achieves only an unintelligible whisper*]

POLORUS

[*Elbowing him toward the left*] Go out in the atrium, Commander, and stick your head in the pool.

[CAIUS *again attempts to speak, but cannot, and waddles off*]

PISO

[*Calling after him*] Don't forget the professor!

POLORUS

[*Coming back*] That old soak is on his last legs. Practically a teetotaler! I wonder what he—

PISO

[*At the table*] Where did you get that olive oil?

POLORUS

Out of the tall yellow bottle.

PISO

Well, you wasted four ounces of good turpentine liniment.

POLORUS

[*Examining the bottles*] Um, it's six of one and half a dozen of the other. But I *didn't* waste any ammonia. I gave him ninety per cent. alcohol.

PISO

What are the odds? I once cured a case of chilblains with a couple of liver pills.

POLORUS

You ought to try some of those pills on the Emperor.

PISO

Ought to try them? I have given him a keg of them.

POLORUS

Then it's no wonder *I* can't cure him.

PISO

[*Irascibly*] *You?* Do you ever *cure* patients? Oh, my word! It's those infernal powders of yours that counteract the pills. No wonder he gets worse. I can never give him enough of *my* pills to catch up with *your* powders. If you—

[*He is interrupted by the sudden appearance of*

SIMON, *the Christian giant, from the right.* SIMON'S *eyes are staring, and he is evidently labouring under much excitement*]

SIMON

[*In a sepulchral voice*] God be with you!

PISO

[*Startled*] The same to you, Reverend. But what are *you* doing here?

SIMON

[*Mysteriously*] I have business here.

POLORUS

Business here? Don't you know what's going on?

SIMON

I see preparations for debauchery—sin—venery—the devil's work.

PISO

Not so loud, old schooner. The *Emperor* is giving this banquet. Remember the Espionage Act.

SIMON

My business is *with* the Emperor.

POLORUS

[*Amazed and amused*] Surely you are not going to the banquet yourself?

[PISO *haw-haws*]

SIMON

[*Solemnly*] I have come to—to—to—[*He hesitates*] I have come to—

PISO

You have come to look them over?

POLORUS

You want to see whether the girls really *do* take off their—

SIMON

[*Cutting in*] Girls? Bah! I abhor the scarlet woman. My prayers are for one pure woman, for—

PISO

The wife Lucia!

POLORUS

[*Nodding his head*] He's mashed on her.

SIMON

[*Indignantly*] I am old enough to be her father.

PISO

Yes, so is the Emperor.

SIMON

Let him have a care! Let him remember the wrath to come.

POLORUS

What! At a banquet?

SIMON

Even at a banquet. Even amid the flesh-pots.

Even among the scarlet women. Let him remember his lawful wife. I hear talk that is terrible.

PISO

What do you hear?

SIMON

That he plans to cast her off. More, that he plans to—murder her.

POLORUS

[*Glancing about him*] Oh, I say!

SIMON

Even as he has murdered other poor women—trusting hearts—discarded wives. [*Suddenly infuriated*] But not the wife Lucia! The moment his slaves touch the anointed of the Lord—[*He draws a dagger*]—that moment I plunge this knife into his heathen heart!

PISO

[*Nervously*] My dear sir, calm yourself. This is awful talk. I positively refuse to listen to any such anarchism.

SIMON

I shall wait here. I am ready. I shall serve the Lord.

POLORUS

Suppose you let me have that knife. I am more used to such things. You are a clergyman. It may cut you.

[*As he steps forward, there are noises outside, to*

the left. The band behind the curtain strikes up more loudly, and presently voices call "The Emperor! The Emperor!"]

SIMON

[*Flourishing the dagger*] Nay! I shall wait here! I am ready.

[*More cries. The music grows louder.* PISO *and* POLORUS *grow increasingly alarmed. Cries of* "The Emperor! The Emperor!"]

PISO

[*In a panic*] What are we to do?

POLORUS

If we had time we could anesthetize him.

PISO

Yes, if we had time we could hypnotize him. *But now?*

SIMON

Pray to the Lord!

POLORUS

Yes, yes, but not now. Not here. I never miss the Day of Atonement. I promised my old mother. [*In full demoralization, to* PISO] *You* tackle him.

PISO

[*Panic-stricken, to* SIMON] Why not go out and take a little walk and come back later?

SIMON

I stay here. I am set here to watch. An angel charged me to—

[*Shouts of* "The Emperor!" *very near. The music grows louder still. Cheers behind the hangings*]

POLORUS

[*Pushing him back frantically*] But you're blocking up the passage-way. It is forbidden. Surely you don't want to *offend* the Emperor.

SIMON

[*Idiotically*] Not unnecessarily.

PISO

Well, then—

POLORUS

[*Inspired*] Ah, here!

[*He shoves* SIMON *behind the hangings at the extreme right, where they overlap the back wall*]

PISO

[*Greatly relieved*] Whew!

POLORUS

[*Coming back*] Just in time! [*Suddenly alarmed again*] But suppose he jumps out and—

[*He drops his voice*]

PISO

[*Resolutely*] Who?

POLORUS

[*In surprise*] Who? This blamed—

PISO

I didn't see anybody. Did *you?*

POLORUS

[*With a relieved wink*] No. I saw no one.

PISO

He must have sneaked in during the day.

POLORUS

Maybe the wife Lucia let him in.

[*Cries of* "The Emperor!" *just outside. With it an unexpected babble of women's voices.* PISO *and* POLORUS, *at this new sound, look at each other in sudden astonishment as* RUFINIUS *enters*]

RUFINIUS

His Imperial Majesty!

[RUFINIUS *is followed by two centurions.* PISO *drops to one knee and* POLORUS *follows suit.* HELIOGABALUS *stalks in with* PAULA *hanging to one arm and* CÆLESTIS *to the other. Behind the three, crowded closely, are* ANNIA FAUSTINA, AQUILIA SEVERA, *and three or four other wives. Last of all comes* DACIA. HELIOGABALUS *wears a magnificent toga of imperial purple, with gold borders very heavily embroidered, and a wreath of laurel. He moves to the centre of the stage*

without a word, and as if scarcely conscious of PAULA *and* CÆLESTIS. *A murmur of confused speech among the other wives. Obviously, there has been an encounter outside.* PISO *and* POLORUS *get to their feet, and move off discreetly toward the right, pushing their wheeled table ahead of them. Presently they go out.* RUFINIUS *takes station at the side of the archway leading into the banquet hall, directly before the place where* SIMON *is concealed. The centurions go to the extreme right, and stand impassive. Throughout this scene, sounds of revelry come from the banquet hall*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Suddenly shaking off* PAULA *and* CÆLESTIS, *and swinging 'round to face the other wives, his arms folded*] The answer is Yes and No!

PAULA

[*Melodramatically*] What!

HELIOGABALUS

Yes to question number one; no to question number two.

THE OTHER WIVES

[*Together*] Which is which? . . . Do we come back? . . . What can he mean? . . . Which question is number one? . . . He's going to put her out!

PAULA

[*Authoritatively*] Silence! Let me do the talking. [*To* HELIOGABALUS, *bravely but a bit uneasily*] What do you mean . . . darling?

HELIOGABALUS

Simply this, molasses jar. You all come back—but not together.

THE OTHER WIVES

[*In a babble, as before. They don't quite know whether to hail the news, or to protest*] Oh, we come back! . . . But what does *that* mean? . . . I don't understand it at all . . . Do you mean—?

PAULA

[*Sharply*] Silence!

[*The babble is cut short instantly. A momentary silence.* HELIOGABALUS *stands with his arms folded. The wives look uneasy and a bit foolish*]

PAULA

[*To* HELIOGABALUS, *quaveringly*] You are not going to—?

HELIOGABALUS

Carpenters are at work building a plain double-bed. I have ordered that farm taken out and burned. The double-bed will suffice until—

PAULA

But I thought we were to come back.

HELIOGABALUS

You do—but you come back one by one.

CÆLESTIS

But where will the rest of us sleep?

HELIOGABALUS

Where you *have* been sleeping—during the late revolution. Sleep wherever you please. If the palace isn't big enough, I'll have barracks built.

PAULA

[*Maudlinly*] Oh, my poor head! I can't understand a thing he says!

HELIOGABALUS

Let me explain. The old system had its advantages. I was used to it and strongly approved it. But the older I get, the more I learn. At ninety or a hundred I should be genuinely wise. *One* thing I have learned is that the Christian system, too, has—

PAULA

[*Hysterically*] He's deserting us for that street-woman!

[*The other wives set up a shrill protest of* "Ohs"]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Talking them down*] The Christian system, too, has its advantages. It is lonesome, but peaceful. I sleep better. The ventilation is better. More air. Fewer breathing.

PAULA

I protest against it as immoral! We are your lawful—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Sardonically*] Immoral? Hah, because it's pleasant! You, too, have become infected by this Christianity.

PAULA

Oh, what an insult!

HELIOGABALUS

But to resume. You take your turns one by one, quietly and in order. First, let us say—well, first one of you. To be selected by me. I have a system worked out. Each stays on until—until I feel like a change. Then the next. And so on.

PAULA

I see it all. It's a scheme to get that Christian hussy in—and then keep us out!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Darkly, rolling his eye over the group of wives*] The Christian girl will not be the first. She must take her turn.

CÆLESTIS

See! She remains. What did I tell you?

[*The other wives babble*]

HELIOGABALUS

If you are my lawful wives, then she is my lawful

wife. I must be just. As Pontifex Maximus I am the *incarnation* of justice.

PAULA

I am against justice for Christians!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Humorously*] Exactly. There is always some one that justice doesn't apply to.

CÆLESTIS

You might take her in, and then keep her a year.

HELIOGABALUS

It's theoretically possible, but very improbable. No, my inclination to the Christian system has its limits. The girl must take her turn. I must suffer, say once a year. Where is she, by the way?

PAULA

Praying somewhere, I suppose.

CÆLESTIS

[*Maliciously*] Maybe she has run off with that old bed-tick of an evangelist.

HELIOGABALUS

I shall ask her to pray for *you*, Cælestis.

CÆLESTIS

[*Horrified*] Oh, oh! She'll put a spell on me!

HELIOGABALUS

Never fear. [*Wearily*] I have tried it. Her

spells are nothing. She couldn't even cure my stomach-ache. . . . And now, off with you. I have important business. I am entertaining the Supreme Bench.

PAULA

[*Defiantly*] It is your duty to turn her out.

CÆLESTIS

It is your duty to—

ANOTHER WIFE

It is your duty—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Irritably*] Duty! Duty! Always my duty! Well, it is my duty to—

PAULA

Do your duty and you'll be happy.

HELIOGABALUS

A fallacy, my dill pickle. Duty may make a man able to *stand* a thing, but it never makes him *enjoy* it. Now good-night.

[*He shoos them toward the door, left*]

PAULA

I object! I protest!

[*The other wives begin to babble, joining her protest*]

HELIOGABALUS

Enough! I order you—as Emperor! [*They grow*

silent and slink away] Disobey, and—[*They start out,* HELIOGABALUS *following them toward the door*] The name of the evening's nominee will reach you in due course.

PAULA

[*At the door*] I—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Peremptorily*] Guards!

[PAULA *runs out, and the others crowd after her. In the scuffle, one of the wives is pushed to one side, and finds herself inside after the door bangs. It is* DACIA. HELIOGABALUS, *turning back toward the entrance to the banquet-room, notices her. She hasn't said a word during the preceding scene, but has noticeably hung back. Now, facing the Emperor, she is suddenly confused, and turns toward the door in alarm. But he halts her*]

HELIOGABALUS

What! Little Dacia! [*She nods shyly*] I didn't notice you. I didn't hear a word from you.

DACIA

[*Ingenuously*] I didn't say anything.

HELIOGABALUS

Not a word about duty?

DACIA

No.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Elaborately kissing her hand*] Thank you.

DACIA

I hope you are feeling much better.

HELIOGABALUS

Thank you again. If I saw more of you, Dacia, I'd soon be well. [*A pause*] I heard you singing last night. It was very sweet of you.

DACIA

[*Simply*] I thought you might like me to do it.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Now thoroughly interested*] Like it? I loved it! You gave me pleasant dreams. I dreamed that things were as—as they used to be, and that—

DACIA

[*Snuggling into his arms*] Have you missed me?

HELIOGABALUS

Enormously! At first I wondered just what it was I missed so much, but then I knew. It was my little wifey. [*He kisses her gently*] Now she's never going to leave me again.

DACIA

[*With all the art of the cutie, but apparently simply*] If you want me.

HELIOGABALUS

I want you every minute. [*With elaborate tender-*

ness] I was so worried about you. How did your cold get? Better? You are sure you take care of yourself? I wish you would stop wearing those very thin stockings. [*Feeling of her frock*] And this dress! It's like a night-gown.

DACIA

[*Coyly, burying her face on his shoulder*] I have a new night-gown.

HELIOGABALUS

When am I to see it?

DACIA

You never notice such things.

HELIOGABALUS

What nonsense. Didn't I notice the pink one—the one you worked yourself—all those forget-me-nots?

DACIA

That was the first you ever saw.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Sentimentally*] I'll never forget it. Ah, those days! Those happy, happy days!

[*During all this scene* SIMON *has occasionally peeped out from behind the hangings, his eyes popping as* HELIOGABALUS *grows more and more ardent.* RUFINIUS *has discreetly turned his back and the centurions are far to the right, also with their backs toward the centre. All the while noisy music and whoops have been coming from*

the banquet-hall, with occasional bursts of applause. Now and then a definite voice may be heard—probably old CAIUS'S]

DACIA

You *do* love me, don't you?

HELIOGABALUS

Don't you know it?

DACIA

I think so. But how much?

HELIOGABALUS

That much. [*An enormous kiss. Then*—HELIOGABALUS *straightens up, glances at the banquet-room entrance, and gives a weary sigh*] Well, I suppose I must go in. It's really important—a very serious affair—the first in months. You know why there has been none. I made a lamentable error. I hate bloodshed, but I really think I'd be justified in—

[SIMON *peeps from behind the hangings, his eyes popping*]

DACIA

But I'll see you soon?

HELIOGABALUS

I should surely hope so. I nominate you number one. And I'll make Paula number two, so there'll be no temptation to—

DACIA

[*Very demurely*] You won't be long?

HELIOGABALUS

How could I be long? [*Kissing her briefly again*] And don't forget! [*He whispers to her, and, as if blushing, she hides her face on his shoulder*] You understand?

DACIA

[*Whispers*] I'll be there.

HELIOGABALUS

And now—[*Another kiss*] Wear that pink one. You know. Now I must—[*A sudden idea*] But why not simply stay? How idiotic of me not to have thought of it! You can sit right beside me as you used to do. I'll get away all the sooner.

DACIA

But it's a men's party!

HELIOGABALUS

Pish! You'd be welcome at *any* men's party. Just watch how the judiciary gape at you!

DACIA

But my frock! This old thing!

HELIOGABALUS

It's perfect! Those old rats never look at the clothes; they look at the girl. [*He takes his laurel wreath from his head and puts it on* DACIA'S *head*] There! The last touch!

[DACIA *is still doubtful and hangs back to steal a glance at herself in a pocket-mirror, but* HELIO-

GABALUS *takes her arm and they turn toward the entrance to the banquet-hall.* RUFINIUS *claps his hands, trumpets ring out; the two centurions step forward and draw back the hangings. A scene of gaudy splendour is revealed. The banquet-hall reaches to the back of the stage, with a floor three steps higher than that of the corridor. A superb flash of colour. There is a huge horse-shoe of a table, very low, and it is surrounded by the low couches on which the Romans reclined at meals. Around the horse-shoe are grouped the guests—senators, generals, ambassadors, judges and other magnificoes—chiefly elderly and grizzled men.* CAIUS *is to the left, and is quickly seen to be far gone in liquor.* HELIOGABALUS' *place is in front and to the right, so that when he rises to speak his profile is toward the audience in the theatre. In the centre of the horse-shoe is a small dancing floor, and exactly in the middle of it a tall fountain, with coloured lights playing upon it. The walls of the hall are richly decorated, and various barbaric banners show brilliant patches of colour. All the guests are in white togas, but on the shoulder of every one there is some coloured badge of rank. The musicians are far to the rear and their music is heard constantly, save when* HELIOGABALUS *speaks. They play strange, levantine tunes, sometimes in the old Greek modes. Translated*

into modern tones, their music sounds as if made by two violins, a 'cello, a zither, an oboe and a snare-drum.

As the hangings go back, and HELIOGABALUS, *with* DACIA *on his arm, is revealed to the banqueters, there is a sudden silence. Then* CAIUS *springs to his feet and shouts* "Vivat Imperator!" *and the whole assemblage rises. The old boys stand unsteadily as he mounts the three steps and moves toward his place—it is evident that they have been dining very well. There is no cheer, but the chord of C major is sounded loudly by the musicians. This cuts off the dance that has been in progress. The dancer, half-naked, pauses irresolutely for a second, and then, full of stage-fright, leaps off the dancing floor, plunges through the standing guests to the left, and disappears. The guests all crane their necks to see* DACIA]

CAIUS

[*Turning tipsily as the dancer makes off*] Hey, there!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Taking his place, with* DACIA *beside him*] Let us sit.

[*The guests settle down, some gracefully enough, but others with much difficulty. They all continue to steal stares at* DACIA]

CAIUS

[*Rising unsteadily*] Majesty, the dancer took to the woods. I feel I ought to apologize.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Genially*] Maybe something struck her suddenly —conscience, or gallstones, or something.

CAIUS

Oh, no. I've known that little one for years—sound as a gladiator. Maybe—[*He winks*] I'd better go and—and—

[*He rises wobblingly*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Cutting in*] And fetch her?

CAIUS

That's it—and fetch her.

[*He winks elaborately again and wobbles off, stumbling once or twice over his toga*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Rising in his best imperial manner. As he gets to his legs the musicians repeat the massive chord of C major*] Gentlemen, my apologies for my tardiness. The fact is, I didn't know until the last minute if my health would permit me to join you. I was brought here on a litter, attended by two physicians. They are out in the ante-chamber at this moment, mixing pills. [*With the sudden malignancy of the dyspeptic*] I shall take, say, 5,000 more pills. Then we'll

see how far a doctor's neck can stretch—a curious scientific experiment—vivisection, so to speak. [*Recovering his former manner*] But this is no talk for a banquet. If I told you my symptoms you would fall into faints, with screams of horror. [*One of the guests struggles to his feet and makes as if to speak*] Yes, Senator, I have tried that Armenian lithia water. I don't doubt it cured your ringing in the ears, but it has only made my stomach-ache worse. No more water! I have got down enough water of late to float Caius' whole fleet. To the sewers with water! What have we here? [*He lifts up a goblet and sniffs at it*] Aha! Good red Terentum! Gentlemen, I pledge you!

[*The whole assemblage rises, goblets in hand. Slaves elbow in with fresh jars of wine, placing them upon the table*]

VARIOUS GUESTS

Vivat Imperator! Vivat Elegabalus!

HELIOGABALUS

Gentlemen, let us all drink to Rome, the one perfect and immortal Empire—the model and despair of other states—the mother of justice—the guardian of civilization! Rome cannot die! Rome forever!

GUESTS

Rome forever!

[*They drink stupendous drafts, some of them coming up quite out of breath*

[HELIOGABALUS *sits down, and offers a sip from his goblet to* DACIA. *As the others tumble into their places, there is a turmoil to the left, and* CAIUS' *voice is heard*]

CAIUS

[*In a hoarse voice, without*] Oh, come on, dearie! Don't be afraid!

[*The guests snicker*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Rising so that he can see*] Bring her in, Caius.

[CAIUS *comes in with an almost naked dancing-girl. She is coal-black and very much abashed. The guests whoop and roar as they see her*]

CAIUS

This is a different one, Majesty. I couldn't find the other one. I hunted high and low. [*Again he winks elaborately*] This one is an Egyptian—her name is Irene. I take a fatherly interest in this one.

A GUEST

Dear old papa!

ANOTHER GUEST

[*Mimicking a baby*] Da-da! Da-da!

HELIOGABALUS

She seems bashful.

CAIUS

Just a little. Ain't used to dancing before ladies. [*An elaborate and idiotic bow to* DACIA] She has

her instructions: no rough stuff. Perhaps her Majesty—

HELIOGABALUS

Let her display her art. This is a different "Her Majesty."

CAIUS

[*Very drunk*] Profound apologies. My error. No offence, Majesty, I assure you. My eyes—astigmatism—

HELIOGABALUS

Now then!

[*The music starts with a crash, and the dancer leaps into a wild dance. At first the guests regard her stolidly, but in a few seconds some of them begin to rise to see her better*]

CAIUS

[*Rising*] This is nothing, Majesty. This is just the start.

HELIOGABALUS

Very interesting. Has the dance any significance? Is it symbolical?

CAIUS

I should say it is. If you understand it, it brings tears to your eyes. Very affecting, indeed. I'll explain it. You observe that sort of flop-flop of the arms? Well, that signifies—[*The music drowns him out. To the musicians, over his shoulder*] Not so loud, professor. Where do you think you are?

[*The music grows soft. The dancing girl now launches into a series of amazing wriggles, occasionally leaping into the air.* CAIUS, *very solemnly and unsteadily, explains as she goes on.* HELIOGABALUS, *while this is in progress, sips his wine, and gradually grows very mellow in humour. Now and then he laughs and claps his hands*]

CAIUS

Her dark complexion, gentlemen, signifies death. Wash them, and they are almost white. People think Egyptians are niggers—all a mistake. I knew a girl in Memphis—her name was Saidee—almost as white as anybody. [*The girl begins to shed veils*] There it is, plain enough. The man is dying. Casting off this mortal coil. Dying by inches. First his feet, then his arms, then his stomach, then his lungs, then his—and so on. [*The girl squats, and wriggles about*] Death struggles. Poor fellow doesn't want to go. Thinks he is too young. [*She leaps into the air*] Last gasp. You can almost hear it. [*She begins to whirl*] Getting dizzy. Scared. Sends for the priest. [*The music slackens a bit*] Prayers. [*Louder and faster again*] Too late. It's all up. [*A wild leaping about*] Throw out the reverend and send for the embalmers. [*She leaps into the fountain*] The soul takes flight. [*She is now almost naked. The water plays upon her*] Nothing left but the body. Hardly a stitch on. Have to strip 'em, of

course, to pickle 'em. Very interesting process. They keep for ever. [*The girl now launches into her final cavortings*] This shows the soul in the Egyptian heaven. Very subtle symbolism. Every wriggle means something. I remember—

[*During this last speech,* LUCIA *has quietly slipped into the fore-scene, from the door to the right.* RUFINIUS, *of course, observes her at once, and is visibly startled and alarmed. But those in the banquet-hall, at first, do not see her.* HELIOGABALUS *and* DACIA *are watching the dancer, and chuckling over* CAIUS' *exposition. The guests, with veil after veil coming off, see nothing else. It is* CAIUS *whose eyes first take her in. He halts, glances swiftly at* HELIOGABALUS, *and then at* LUCIA *again. But before his eyes are followed by* HELIOGABALUS, LUCIA *has spoken*]

LUCIA

[*In round, resonant tones*] For shame!

[HELIOGABALUS *has been lolling with his arm around* DACIA. *The words electrify him. He leaps to his feet, and stands there for a second as if thunderstruck and speechless*]

LUCIA

[*Her arms folded, standing firmly, as if defying the universe to move her*] For shame!

[*The music stops and the dancer collapses.* CAIUS *grasps the table unsteadily. A dozen other*

guests leap to their feet. There is a dead silence]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Taking a step forward*] Hell!

LUCIA

You may well say hell. There is nothing in hell itself—

HELIOGABALUS

[*Conciliatingly, coming down the steps*] Now, now, my dear. Really, you must—

LUCIA

Don't touch me, Beelzebub!

HELIOGABALUS

Oh, I say, darling! [*He is patently nonplussed. He turns 'round to his guests*] Gentlemen— [*A deprecating, apologetic gesture*] You will pardon me. My stomach, unluckily—

[*He comes down to the corridor floor, and the two centurions swiftly and discreetly draw the hangings. In doing so they accidentally uncover a corner of* SIMON, *but it is only for an instant, and they don't notice it. Neither does* RUFINIUS, *who has retired to the right.* DACIA *has come out with* HELIOGABALUS, *but she slips quietly to the left and stands against the wall, silent during the ensuing scene*]

LUCIA

[*Oratorically*] For less than this the flames con-

sumed Sodom and Gomorrah! That woman was naked!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Weakly*] But she was a *coloured* woman, my dear. Didn't you notice?

LUCIA

This infamy must end! A scarlet woman naked before you—and a scarlet woman in your arms!

HELIOGABALUS

[*A sudden change of manner*] A what in my arms?

LUCIA

A scarlet woman!

[*It takes a moment for the charge to soak in, but when it does* HELIOGABALUS *is completely changed. No more conciliation. He is furiously angry and shows it*]

HELIOGABALUS

A scarlet woman? That "scarlet woman" is my wife!

LUCIA

[*Still resolutely, but somewhat alarmed by his rage*] *I* am your wife. Your *one* wife.

HELIOGABALUS

Are you? Well, that is something to be remedied. That is a curable disease. A "scarlet woman"! Think of it!

LUCIA

[*Now beginning to realize that she has gone too far*] You would put me away?

HELIOGABALUS

Either you put that crazy Christian balderdash away, or I put *you* away. Once and for all time, I have got enough of it. I am Emperor here, and I must live like an Emperor, not like a slave. This praying shakes my nerves; water has given me a terrible stomach-ache; I have chills at night.

LUCIA

[*Rather weakly*] The Word—

HELIOGABALUS

Maybe, but not for me! Damn water! Damn the Christian style of kissing! Damn going to bed at ten o'clock! Damn—

LUCIA

[*Her hands over her ears*] Get thee behind me, Satan!

HELIOGABALUS

Satan! So Dacia is a scarlet woman, and I am Satan! And I thought I was Emperor of Rome! [*Wildly, showing that there was wine in his goblet*] For less than this, I have—

[*His fists clenched, he pauses*]

LUCIA

You can't harm me. The Lord is with me.

HELIOGABALUS

[*This last defiance determines him*] Oh, *is* he? Then we'll see what he'll do for you when the alligators begin to sniff you. Guards!

[*As the centurions spring forward,* LUCIA *screams*]

LUCIA

[*In great terror*] Would you kill me?

[*But before the centurions can reach her or* HELIOGABALUS *can reply,* SIMON *leaps from behind the hangings, his dagger drawn*]

SIMON

Stop, tyrant!

[HELIOGABALUS *steps back, startled, and for an instant the centurions hesitate in alarm*]

LUCIA

Help me, Simon!

SIMON

Lay a hand on this maiden and I'll—

[*He flourishes the dagger and makes at* HELIOGABALUS, *but by this time the centurions have recovered their heads, and are immediately upon him.* RUFINIUS, *from the right, also leaps to the rescue, and in two seconds* SIMON *is pinned from behind and his dagger is on the floor.* DACIA, *during all this, has screamed once or twice, but has not moved from her place. Sounds of music come from behind the hangings, and shouts of*

laughter—loud enough to show that the banqueters are very drunk, and do not hear the commotion in front]

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* SIMON] So there you are!

SIMON

[*Almost incoherently*] Murderer! You would send your lawful wife to the lions! Pagan! Heathen! [*Rolling his eyes upward*] O Lord, watch over Thy servant! O Lord, send Thy lightnings to blast this heretic!

HELIOGABALUS

Bosh! Save all that O Lord business until you need it more. It won't be long. [*To* RUFINIUS] Take this man to the circus, and have him chained—arm, leg and neck. There will be orders about him tomorrow morning. I'll want the iron stake and a couple of barrels of whale-oil.

[LUCIA *screams and rushes toward* HELIOGABALUS *supplicatingly, but* SIMON *drops on his knees in ecstasy. It gradually appears that he welcomes death—that he craves martyrdom*]

SIMON

[*His eyes rolling*] O Lord, I thank Thee! To die in Thy name! Lord, I thank Thee for this boon!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Astonished*] What!

LUCIA

I am to blame, not he. Let me—

SIMON

[*Still happy*] O Lord, I thank Thee for this boon —this martyrdom! I thank Thee!

HELIOGABALUS

Silence! What is the idiot doing?

LUCIA

He is happy that he may die for the Faith.

HELIOGABALUS

The Faith? What has the Faith to do with it? He is to die for an attempt at assault and battery.

LUCIA

It is all one.

HELIOGABALUS

Do you mean to say that murder is a part of Christianity?

LUCIA

No, but martyrdom is.

SIMON

[*To the centurions and* RUFINIUS] Brothers, let us pray. Let me pray for you.

HELIOGABALUS

Never in the world! I have heard enough praying to last me for ever. [*To* LUCIA, *still not quite able to comprehend it*] So he actually *wants* to be burned?

LUCIA

[*Preachily*] He thirsts for paradise.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Humorously*] *Solomon's*, I guess! Well, I'm surely not going to accommodate him. [*To* SIMON] Get up. [*To* RUFINIUS *and the centurions*] Let him go. [*To* SIMON] You are reprieved.

SIMON

[*Blubbering*] Cæsar, I—

HELIOGABALUS

Silence! I say you are reprieved. You are not going to get to paradise if *I* can help it. [*To the centurions*] Take him out, give him a good cowhiding, and run him out of town. [*To* SIMON] If you ever come back, off goes your Adam's apple. And I'll slice your nose flat with your face. Bear that in mind.

LUCIA

[*Heroically*] If he goes, then *I* go too.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Overjoyed by the news, he is momentarily speechless; then*—] Oh, surely not! You don't mean to say that you—

LUCIA

Then *I* go too!

HELIOGABALUS

But that's really too much! [*Bracing up percepti-*

bly] It's really more than I deserve, fair gooseberry!

LUCIA

[*Rising to eloquence*] I turn my back on Nineveh. Out there in the West—[*her arms flung wide toward the audience*]—*there* is my work. There I shall preach the Word. Far from these Roman cities and the sins of men. There lies the future harvest of the Lord.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Appraising the audience. Somewhat doubtfully*] Um—well—I wish you luck. [*Eagerly*] But could you get ready in time? You see, Simon is leaving at once.

LUCIA

I go with him.

HELIOGABALUS

But your clothes? It will take you some time to pack.

LUCIA

The Lord's work is not done in fine raiment. As I am, so shall I preach the Word.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Very eager to get her off*] Nobly spoken. If you need any money—

LUCIA

I want no money. I shall pray for you.

HELIOGABALUS

[*In alarm*] But surely not here. This is no place for prayer. [*Indicating the banquet-room*] It's really rather too—er—riotous, isn't it? Pray for me after you get started. Pray for me out there—[*pointing in the direction of the audience*]—in the West.

LUCIA

I shall pray for you every day and every night.

HELIOGABALUS

Yes, yes—every night—out there—[*again pointing*]—in the West. And now I must get back to my guests. The centurions will see you off. I surely wish you every sort of luck. Let me hear from you now and then. Let me hear how your enterprise comes on. I'll send word that you are to be protected. A happy journey.

LUCIA

Fare you well! May the Lord keep you!

HELIOGABALUS

Thanks. Are you sure you don't need more clothes?

LUCIA

I need no worldly goods. My Faith, the Lord, are enough!

HELIOGABALUS

So you said. Well, then, good-bye and good luck!

If you ever get into difficulties, don't hesitate to write to me. Simply "The Emperor, Rome," will reach me.

LUCIA

[*Going*] The Lord be with you.

HELIOGABALUS

Thank you.

LUCIA

The Lord forgive you!

HELIOGABALUS

Thank you.

LUCIA

The Lord bless you!

HELIOGABALUS

Thank you!

[*She goes out slowly, and* RUFINIUS *and the centurions follow with* SIMON]

SIMON

[*At the door*] I suffer for the Faith. I—

HELIOGABALUS

[*To* RUFINIUS] Omit the cowhiding.

[*As they go out,* HELIOGABALUS *turns back alone.* DACIA *has been concealed by the opened door at the left.* HELIOGABALUS, *observing* SIMON'S *dagger on the floor, picks it up and looks at it reflectively. He runs his hands along the blade. He applies the point to his breast. He tries the*

effect of the cold steel on his throat. Loud music from within, and a great crash. Laughter and applause]

DACIA

[*Stepping forward, somewhat alarmed by his toying with the knife*] Be careful!

HELIOGABALUS

[*He gives a start and turns quickly*] There you are! And I was wondering what had become of you!

DACIA

I was here all the while.

HELIOGABALUS

Here?

DACIA

Over in the corner. [*Snuggling close to him*] I was awfully scared.

HELIOGABALUS

[*Now grandly brave*] Don't let it worry you, tender baby. It's the trade risk. If this stomach-ache of mine fetches me, or those quacks poison me with their pills, I'll be the first Roman Emperor to die in bed for two hundred years. [*Amorously*] But we don't want to think of such things, do we? It was worth risking my life to get rid of that theologian.

DACIA

[*Coyly*] I thought you—liked her.

HELIOGABALUS

Bah! I work so hard that sometimes my mind wanders. Then there is my stomach-ache. I thought she could cure it with that Christian magic of hers—that praying, and O Lording, and so on. But it didn't work.

DACIA

Poor dear! And now you have to go back to the awful banquet. [*Yells from within*]

HELIOGABALUS

[*Tenderly*] Do you want me to go back?

DACIA

I? What have I to do with it?

HELIOGABALUS

You have everything to do with it. Do you want me to?

DACIA

[*Half a whisper*] No.

[*There ensues a long kiss. The arm of coincidence provides a dreamy tune from the band behind the hangings*]

HELIOGABALUS

Let us cut the banquet! To hell with the banquet! What do you say?

DACIA

[*Like a naughty child*] To hell with the banquet!

HELIOGABALUS

[*Half to himself*] Imagine that Christian—[*taking her arm*] Come on! [*They sneak half-way across the stage. His eyes feast upon her. He halts a moment*] What wonderful hair!

[*They tiptoe off like truants as*

THE CURTAIN FALLS

THE END

S0-BUZ-034